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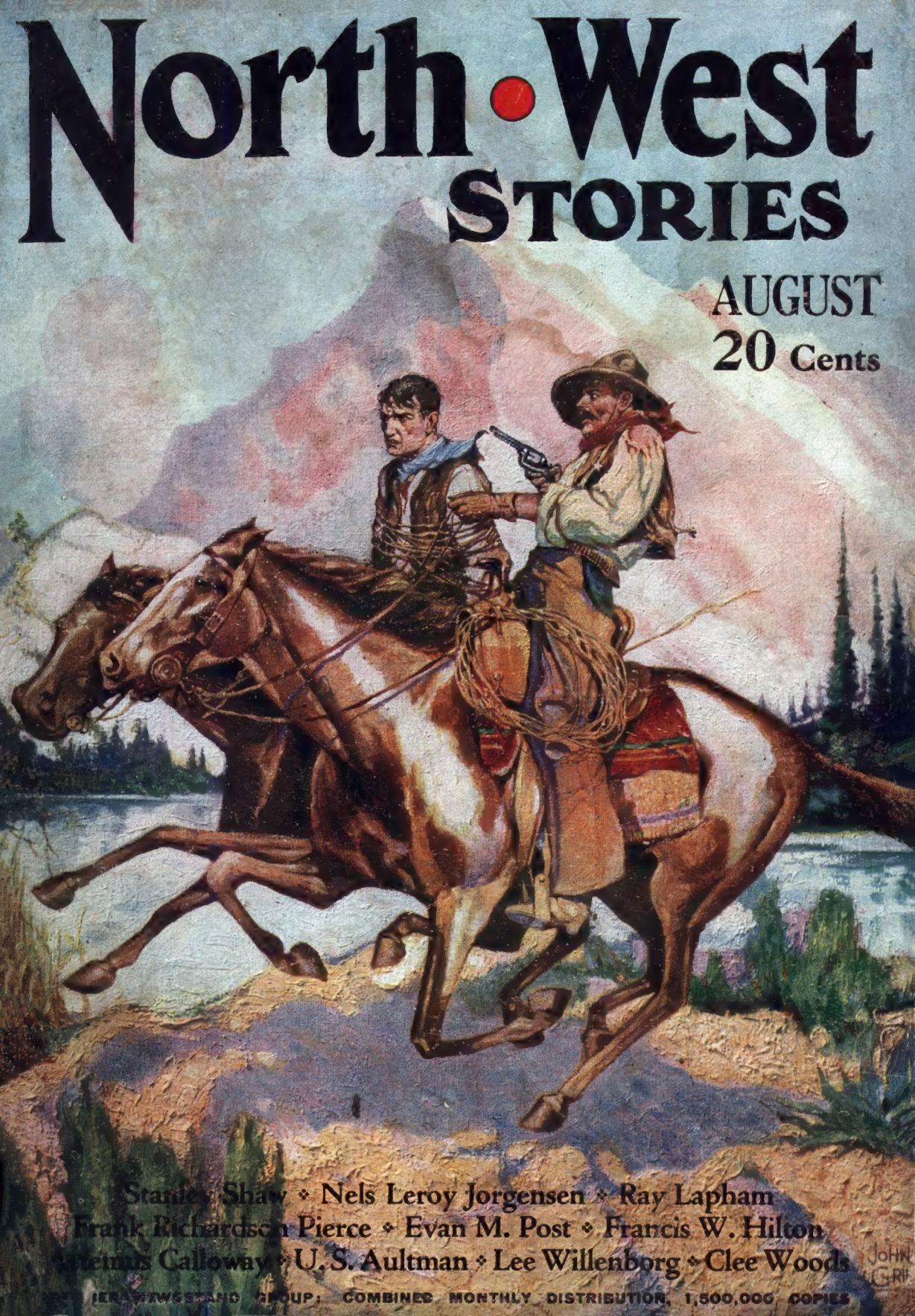

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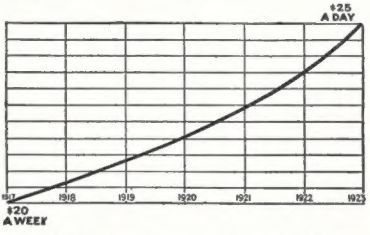

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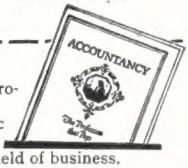

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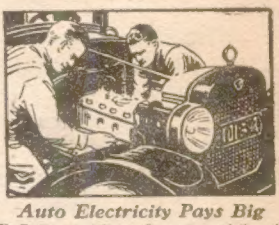

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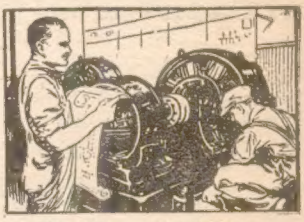

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BIG OUTDOOR STORIES OF THE WEST AND NORTH

Vol. 2, No. 9 AUGUST 1925 20c per copy $2.50 per year

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Flame of the Snow

(A Four-Part Story—Part I)

By Stanley Shaw

Alaska—fleeting canoes—broiling wakes and adventure under the Northern Lights

AS Larry Shannon and Donald Pentwood dropped into their seats at McVicker's Vandeville theatre, a man seated diagonally across the aisle stared at Larry with a puzzled frown.

"Who's the blond palooka just came in?" he asked of his companion, a short, dark man with enormously broad shoulders. "Think I've seen him before, but I can't quite place him."

The short man chuckled throatily.

"That's Larry Shannon, chap that gave the evidence against you in the Bentwood claim-jumping business."

Dave Casson, who had found it wise to remain away from River Royal during the last two years, frowned darkly, swore deeply.

Remember? He should think he did. The Bentwood claim had turned out to be one of the richest copper properties in the Canadian North; and Casson was sure it would have been his but for Larry Shannon's evidence about secretly changed boundary markers.

Casson's thin-lipped mouth, cruel as a cobra's, formed a question—

"What's Shannon doing now?"

"Still chief engineer for the Creolite people," Ferguson answered. "Going up to Storm King Lake tomorrow with his partner, Pentwood, to fish and shoot."

Casson swore again.

"Fish and shoot be damned! It's too late for that. Damn him; he's too nosey altogether; can't let him go up there now; too much at stake."

Then, after a moment's thought, Casson arose from his seat.

"Going behind the curtain," he said. "Be back soon."

He disappeared at the stage entrance behind the boxes, just as the curtain arose for the next act programmed as "Maureen O'Vale, the Modern Trilby."

A girl in a shimmering silver-blue gown stood in the center of the flooding spotlight at the rear of the stage. Her arms and bosom were bare, she carried a violin in one hand; a bow in the other. She had a clear white, almost transparent skin; a vast tumble of red-gold hair; and wonderfully beautiful eyes that flamed and died, flamed and died like spots of living fire.

She stood a moment listless, silent and immobile, like a frozen woman save for those eyes that constantly flamed and died in such an uncannily, weird manner. Then came a belching crash from the orchestra and a tall, spare man with smooth, faun-like features, intense black hair, one plume-lock of white rising from the center of his forehead, strode toward the footlights from the left apron-entrance.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "permit me to introduce to you Miss Maureen O'Vale, the hypnotic violinist," he waved a graceful left hand and arm toward the young woman in the spotlight at the rear. "Miss O'Vale has never taken a music lesson in her life and, in her normal state she does not know the difference between one note and another on the violin, yet, under my hypnotic control she will play even the most difficult music. But, first, I will prove to you that she is hypnotized."

He took a long, straight surgical needle threaded with white silk from the lapel of his coat, stepped back to the girl's side, pushed the needle through one cheek, out the other, and drew the thread back and forth with a triumphant smile and a waving gesture.

The girl did not show by so much as the flicker of an eyelid that she felt any pain; and there was no blood.

"It's either bunk or she's a wax figure!" The remark came from Larry Shannon's seat companion, Donald Pentwood.

Both mining engineers, they were killing time before leaving for a four weeks' vacation in the North by spending the evening at McVicker's. Everything was ready down at the river-side and in charge of their guide, Joline Beaumarchais, for an early morning start.

Big, blond Larry Shannon was the boss; Pentwood, two hundred pounds of always good natured and capable mahogany-haired manhood, his assistant. The two had been pals for years. Though their natures were not in the least alike, they had in common an intense love for the Canadian outdoors.

Either would have laid down his life for the other and told you in the same breath that his friend was a plain darn fool. Yet when you looked in the eyes of him as he said it, you saw, not contempt, but a wonderful love and respect. Such friendship and loyalty is one of the most precious things on earth.

"Bunk? I don't think so," said Larry. "You know they often use hypnotism for performing minor surgical operations."

The man withdrew the needle from the girl's cheek, made a few uncanny passes before her face and she raised the violin until it nestled softly beneath her chin. No other movement save that and the fire in her eyes that still flamed and died, flamed and died.

The man stepped toward the footlights.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "if you will call for any piece of music, no matter how unknown or obscure the composer, Miss O'Vale will now play it for you."

"*Mighty Lak a Rose!*" some one shouted from the gallery.

She played it, played it well; but there was nothing remarkable about that, for the composition is familiar to many violinists.

The next piece requested was more difficult; a voice speaking French in the audience asked for Tschaikowsky's "*Chanson sans Paroles.*" But she played that, too, played it as Larry Shannon was certain he had never heard the composition played before. There was depth; feeling, infinite feeling; exquisite bow work and a tone that seemed perfection. It was truly marvelous.

The house rewarded her with thunderous applause. But the young woman's face was still save for those amazing eyes, as set and expressionless as it had been from the first.

Larry Shannon continued to study her with a perplexed frown.

"Can't make her out," he said to Pentwood. "She has talent enough to be doing the very highest class concert work; two or three thousand a night; yet, here she is, playing a backwoods Canadian vaudeville date in a house that won't pay them a fraction of what they're worth. What's the answer?"

Pentwood laughed scornfully.

"Bunk! There's a catch somewhere. That young woman hasn't moved from her position near the back curtain since she appeared. They've probably got a phonograph behind her and we've really been listening to a Kreisler or Heifitz record all the time."

"But the audience has called each tune," protested Shannon.

"Plants!" scoffed Pentwood. "Some one connected with the show."

"Don't believe it."

The young woman had just concluded playing another *chanson*—there were many French-Canadians in the house—Coutet's "*Meditation*"—and her companion was asking for more suggestions.

Pentwood grinned and dug one elbow into Larry's ribs as he whispered—

"Watch me catch these birds."

Then, aloud, he shouted—

"Please play '*Land of the Whispering Pines,*' by Laurence Shannon!"

Shannon was protesting under his breath.

"No, no, Pen; lay off; it's not fair. Great Ceasar! Scarcely anybody on earth except you and me ever heard that. I wouldn't dare sing or play it myself in company."

"'S fair enough if the act is on the level," Pentwood answered. "The man said: 'no matter how unknown or obscure the composer.' God knows, you're obscure enough as a composer."

The man turned to the young woman and repeated—

"'*Land of the Whispering Pines,*' by Laurence Shannon."

She held the bow poised above the strings; but she did not play. For the first time her face showed the faintest trace of emotion; a sort of listening, puzzled frown. Shannon, leaning forward in his seat, watched her with strained attention.

Moments passed, still she did not play. A gathering murmur of disapproval arose from the audience. Acts at McVicker's were expected to be snappy; it was no place to indulge in stalling—not with safety.

The man, obviously vexed, walked back and said something to the young woman in an undertone; made a few passes before her face. Still she did not play.

Pentwood was chuckling triumphantly.

"Told you I'd catch the birds; They're fakes."

The man was speaking in rather an injured tone:

"I hope no one is attempting to play a joke on us by naming a piece of music that does not exist?" he said.

Larry Shannon was on his feet in an instant.

"I am sorry my friend called for that piece of music," he apologized. "It is an actual composition that I wrote myself; but it is otherwise entirely un-

known, and it would not be strange if the young woman were unable to play it."

The man raised one hand in smiling affability.

"The gentleman need not apologize," he said. "I merely wished to be assured that it was an actual composition. Such being the case, I think Miss O'Vale will be able to play it,"—he glanced back toward her with an anxious look—"though she seems, at present, to be having some difficulty."

Still holding the violin and bow, the young woman's arms dropped listlessly to her side, and she spoke for the first time.

"I can't get it; I can't get it," she cried wistfully, two tears falling slowly down her cheeks. "I am so tired; so tired!"

A murmur of increasing disapproval moved over the house.

"Cut it out and put on another act!" some one shouted from the gallery.

The man again raised one hand. "Please bear with Miss O'Vale just one more moment," he said. "If she plays this composition it will be without question the most wonderful test of her ability over made."

Then to Larry:

"Mr. Shannon, will you kindly step to the orchestra rail and concentrate your mind on your composition?"

Desiring only to help the young woman, for her embarrassment had enlisted his sympathy, Larry walked down the aisle to the orchestra rail.

"You poor fish!" Pentwood whispered after him. "They're making a fool of you. If you're going to be drafted for the act, demand a salary."

Larry stood at the orchestra rail and looked toward the young woman. He could see now that she was scarcely made up at all; perhaps a little powder, but nothing more; no lip-stick or eyebrow pencil; and she could not be more than nineteen or twenty; a mere girl. He caught the subtle perfume of *Violette de Parme.*

A hundred people there knew Larry Shannon, engineering chief for the Creolite Company, and they knew that if this thing went through it was no fake. Honest Larry Shannon would stoop to no collusion with a McVicker's vaudeville act—but they did not expect it would go through.

Larry concentrated. The house was almost as quiet as though it were empty. Finally, the young woman poised her bow above the strings of the violin, still in that attitude of strained listening; but the eyes that looked into Larry's were still dead and lifeless, still damp with tears.

Then, abruptly, her muscles tensed; the eyes flamed; the bow swept across the taut strings in a burst of melody. She played, played with such fire as she had not shown before, played Larry's own song: "*Land of the Whispering Pines.*" The exquisitely plaintive theme throbbed over the seated audience until they arose almost as one man in a burst of thunderous applause.

Then, quite as abruptly, the violin became silent, her arms dropped to her side, she lifted her head and sang in a voice that was golden:

"I love a pine-clothed country,
A land of bright blue nights;
Of mighty purple mountains
And scarlet flaming lights;
Where cold of winter quickens
The blood within each vein;
Where every wild wind whispers;
Come back; come back again.

"Come back to pine rimmed rivers,
To glory trails of snow;
Where wide horizons beckon;
Where only brave men go.
There shall the life you long for
Fill your days with dreams come true,
And the night's enfolding sweetness
Bring your heart love back to you."

As the last note rose and died, Larry Shannon staggered back down the aisle, wiping a damp forehead.

"Too much for me, Pen," he gasped. "Feel as if all the blood had been drained from my veins. Let's get going north on the river."

From the shadow of one of the stage

boxes, Dave Casson watched them go, a queer smile contorting the cruel cobra mouth of him as he thought:

"Guess Maureen has landed you, Mr. Larry Shannon. You'll not be so anxious to go north as you were."

CHAPTER II
Little Montmartre

HALF an hour later, Larry Shannon and his pal, Donald Pentwood, had roused Joline Beaumarchais, their guide, a French Canadian known to everybody who went into the North as the best cook and most skilful riverman in the district, and were piling their food and camp equipment into two huge canoes.

It was raining and the night was dark. That he might better see to stow the duffle, Joline had lighted two coal-oil torches and put one in the bow of each canoe.

The last bit of camp impedimenta having been fitted into its place, Joline was pushing off one canoe, himself in the stern, Pentwood in the bow—to balance the load—while Larry lighted his pipe preparatory to pushing off the other, when they heard the sound of running footsteps coming down the flimsy plank wharf.

A second later a gaunt, pale faced man staggered into the flickering light of the flaring torches.

It was O'Vale, the partner of the hypnotic violin girl. The man was dressed in his stage clothes, but wet to the skin, and his staring eyes looked as if he might have just seen a ghost.

"Where you going in that canoe?" he panted. "They're after me and you got to take me along."

Larry gripped his shoulders and shook him.

"Who's after you? What do you mean?"

"I was drunk," O'Vale gasped, "when our act went on for the second show tonight. Couldn't hypnotize my daughter Maureen; the audience threw the seats at us. I—I—well, I think I killed a man. They chased me with guns."

Larry shook him again.

"Pull yourself together. Where is your daughter?"

O'Vale looked sheepish.

"Gad! I don't know. She started with me but dropped out somewhere. Those damned crazy silver miners have probably killed her."

Larry's teeth clicked viciously on a single word.

"Cur! You'd run off and desert your own daughter?"

Pentwood, who had pushed his canoe ashore and got out, spoke.

"His meal ticket, you mean. I don't believe she can be his daughter." Then, to O'Vale: "Why didn't you hypnotize 'em, you old rummy?"

"We've got to go back there and see what's happened to your daughter," Larry snapped. "And you've got to show us where you left her."

O'Vale became a trembling wreck.

"I wouldn't go back there for a million," he protested. "They'd shoot me on sight. Dammit! I tell you I killed a man; stabbed him through the heart—may have killed two; I don't know."

For the first time Larry saw that O'Vale carried a knife, that his right cuff was stained with blood. He snatched the knife from the man's hand and threw it toward the river with a disgusted gesture.

"You're coming back with me if I have to drag you all the distance by the scruff of the neck," he growled. "Now walk on, and show us where you left your daughter."

O'Vale had become calm enough to understand that arguing with this big blond giant in his present state of mind would be like opposing a tornado. He turned and led the way through the rain; Larry and Pentwood followed.

Soon they were back in the town, now dark and deserted but for an occasional street electric, the rain pelting on the wet pavements like a hail of shot.

Larry began to feel suspicious. He caught O'Vale's arm.

"Look here," he said. "If they were chasing you, how does it happen everything is so quiet? Are you leading us back the way you came, or are you trying to play tricks?"

"It's the way I came," answered O'Vale. "But you must remember that I'm a stranger here; never was in River Royal before in my life."

He started on again, then stopped. "I think it was near this corner I left Maureen," he said. "They were hot after me; she may have taken the other turn."

Pentwood uttered a snort of disgust. "Let's get back to the canoes, Larry. You're a fool to put any faith in this cock-eyed old kegful's chatter. Don't believe he was chased by anything more substantial than his own alcoholic imagination. Willies; if you ask me; he'll be seeing synthetic snakes in a minute."

Larry suddenly stooped and picked up something from the wet pavement. It was a piece of shimmering metallic fabric, the color and material of the gown Maureen O'Vale had worn during the act at McVicker's. It was enough; Larry would not have abandoned the search now, even had he known it meant his death. He turned to Pentwood.

"You take Mr. O'Vale to our rooms," he said. "Get him into some dry clothes and something hot into his stomach. I'll go back toward McVicker's; think I can trace Miss O'Vale from there."

Pentwood and O'Vale vanished in the darkness. Larry stood a moment looking about him. He had recognized the neighborhood; it was Little Montmartre, and he did not like the look of things.

Dope, gambling, and even white slavery were among the mildest of the laws' infractions practiced in "Little Montmartre," as this part of the Canadian city of River Royal was called; yet it was quiet enough now. There wasn't a light to be seen in a window anywhere; but that was a way the district had; at the slightest suspicion of a visit from the authorities everything shut down as suddenly as a tropic twilight.

Larry had not fancied the way old O'Vale had spoken of being a stranger in the city; he had protested too volubly; and it seemed more than a bit queer that, having stabbed a man, he should flee at once toward Little Montmartre for refuge.

As Larry stood there, some one stepped out of a doorway and spoke:

"Hello, sport! What you hanging around for? Lost a pocketbook?"

"Lost a pocketbook" is the trick question usually asked of all chance strangers in Little Montmartre. By his reactions to that query the visitor is judged. If he stares in surprise, one hand flying to his pocket, he is meat for the sacrifice. Does he come back with a jolly, he is safe; in both cases welcome. Should he growl, he is apt to be connected, remotely or close, but nevertheless connected, with the police, a person to be wary of—not to affront, decidedly not to affront.

Larry straightened up with a start, noted the pin-point pupils of the woman's eyes and thought:

"Hop-head. Been down here after a shot of morphine."

Aloud he said:

"No, I haven't lost anything; but I'm looking for a friend; a young woman who was in an act at McVicker's tonight; Miss O'Vale."

The young woman threw back her head and laughed cynically.

"Chasing after footlight wrens, eh?"

Larry caught her arm.

"Quit your nonsense," he snapped. "Have you seen anything of this girl?"

A moment the young woman stared at him with steel hard eyes and tightly closed lips. Then her glance fell before his, and her lower lip protruded.

"Yes, big boy, I have seen her. What of it?"

Larry's face grew stern.

"Just this. I want to know where she is."

"Perhaps you don't know she came

down here only two jumps ahead of a mob from McVicker's that would have beat her pretty face into pulp if they'd caught her?" the woman sneered.

"What were they after *her* for?"

"For shooting Ned Gay, drill boss at the Apex mine," the girl answered. "That's the sort of frail the girl you're searching for is. Ned climbed on the stage during the act and tried to kiss her; she shot him."

"Did Ned Gay die?"

"I don't know," she answered. "I left too soon after the fuss began. But I know her partner knifed two men back in the street there; put them entirely cold. That's why things are so quiet in Little Montmartre. 'Close down quick!' was the order the higher-up guy shot over the telephone."

"All right, that's that," said Larry. "Now tell me where this girl is."

A moment the young woman stared at him with derisively narrowed eyes and sneering mouth. Then as she evaded his grasp and darted away:

"That's for you to find out!"

Larry had started after her when he was halted by the sound of a woman's frantic scream from a window just above where they had been standing. It cut the wet darkness like a knife.

"Help! Help! Father!"

Larry recognized the voice. Drawing his automatic, he bounded up the steps of the old rookery, and grasped the knob of the door. It was locked, but there were fan lights on each side. His shoulder crashed through the one on the right and he was inside. A dimly lit flight of stairs loomed before him; up these he raced into a long hallway flanked with innumerable doors.

From the nearest door poked the yellow face and frightened, peering eyes of a Chinese, his wet lips trembling as he threw up his hands before Larry's leveled automatic and cried

"A raid! A raid!"

The sound of scurrying feet on every hand; half-clad men and women diving from doorways; disappearing into other doorways and the Lord only knew where. In two brief moments the frightened old Chinese and Larry seemed to have the place entirely to themselves.

Larry pushed the Chinese aside and entered a room, the hazy atmosphere inside thick with the mingled odors of what seemed like chloroform and cooking opium.

On a couch with closed eyes lay Maureen O'Vale; beside her sat a withered faced old Chinese woman bending over a spirit lamp busily cooking a sputtering, fruity odored pill of opium. The only reason she had not fled with the others was because she was stone deaf. Until she glanced up now and saw Larry she had not the remotest idea that anything out of the common was going on.

A drug fiend! Larry was turning away with the thought of what a fool he had been to try and help beautiful Maureen O'Vale when a second glance showed him that the girl's hands were bound with heavy cords.

CHAPTER III
Flight, From the Rooftops

THE withered old crone dropped her pill of opium on its long thin needle, came toward Larry with snarling jaws and clawing fingers.

He caught one of her wrists, twisted it behind her back and wheeled just in time to face the first Chinese who had drawn an automatic and was leveling it.

Larry fired the last cartridge in his automatic magazine, and the man dropped. Larry sent the old woman spinning into a corner where she crumpled up into a heap of trembling rags, and, cutting the ropes binding Maureen O'Vale, caught her up and started toward the door.

She half opened her eyes, closed them again with tremendous weariness, and her arm stole about his neck like a lost child that had found haven. Larry felt

suddenly as if his heart had ceased beating.

In the intimate contact of the modern ballroom dances, he had been as close to many women, felt their warm breath upon his cheek, their eager, languorous eyes bathing in his; but never had it affected him like this. He wanted to crush her to his heart, to cover her lips and soft white neck with kisses. The impulse was almost irresistible and he had all but given way to it when a bellowing voice shouted from a door behind him:

"What the hell you doing here?"

Larry whirled. A beetle browed giant of a man with hairy face, clothed only in trousers and a shirt, open at the throat, disclosing a great hairy chest, was crashing toward him.

"Damn you, drop that girl; she's my woman!" roared the hairy giant.

Rapid thinking was one of Larry Shannon's most valuable mental assets and now he would have battled for Maureen O'Vale with the last ounce of strength in his body.

"Is she?" Larry cried, looking, not at the man, but over his shoulder, as if he saw some one there. "I'll fight the two of you for her!"

"What the——" the man whirled to discover who was behind him, but it was too late; Larry had dropped Maureen O'Vale to the couch and was on his back in one mighty football leap.

They crashed to the floor, shaking the very building. Then began a tremendous struggle; Larry's fingers gripped about the man's throat; the man fighting to tear them away and to beat at Larry's face hanging above him with set jaws.

Civilization was in the limbo of the future; the primeval raged in both; no wrestling or prize-ring rules governed, and each man was a giant of muscle and endurance. Across the floor they rolled, kicking, biting, pummelling. Their straining muscles sounded like burring ropes in a windlass.

Mercy was the last thing on earth either thought of; death of the other—murder, if you will—alone could satisfy the wakened beast in both. The meagre furnishings of the room were whirled about and crushed as though a tornado had been turned loose there.

How long this titanic struggle might have lasted is problematical, for they were so evenly matched it seemed neither could gain the upper hand; but abruptly, perhaps aroused by the crash of breaking furniture, Maureen O'Vale opened her eyes.

A moment she stared at them as though the sight were a dream; then her eyes were caught by the glint of Larry's empty automatic that had slipped from his pocket as he leaped. Stealthily, moving like a crouching panther, avoiding the struggling men, the eyes of her again beginning to flame and die, flame and die, she stole toward where the weapon lay on the floor, picked it up, aimed at the heart of Larry's antagonist and pressed the trigger, only to hear the hammer snap harmlessly!

At that instant, the black giant fastened his teeth in Larry's throat. Larry knew he had come to grips with nothing less than death. In agonizing pain, he struggled desperately to free himself, found the struggle useless and was being overcome when he found strength to cry to Maureen O'Vale, who was staring helplessly at the empty automatic:

"Use the butt! Brain him!"

With a convulsive shudder, she grasped the automatic by the barrel and brought it down on the man's skull.

It was enough. In one breathless second Larry had wriggled himself loose, rolled the man over, gripped the automatic from Maureen's hand and was beating him into insensibility.

The man shivered and was still. Larry turned to Maureen O'Vale.

"Come on," he cried, "we must get out of here. The whole pack of Little Montmartre rats are likely to swarm back in a moment."

Together, they raced down the stairs.

A moment later, Larry, finding the key on the inside, had unlocked the door below and was outside in the darkness and the rain, only to meet a fresh difficulty.

A patrol wagon filled with police was just drawing up at the walk before the doorway. As she saw them, Maureen O'Vale fainted.

Larry lifted Maureen in his arms, stepped into the shadow of the doorway before the police could see him and ran back upstairs. Better the ugliest of the Little Montmartre denizens than that the police should find Maureen O'Vale! Up a second flight of stairs; then a third. He could see a ladder leading toward a roof-opening and a pent-house.

Still bearing Maureen O'Vale in his arms, Larry mounted to the flat, graveled roof.

"If there's an outside fire-escape leading down, we can get away," was his thought.

He made the round of the roof, searching for an iron fire-escape, finally discovered it, on the east side of the building. But, below, stood two guarding police officers! Whoever was bossing this particular raid evidently knew his business and was taking no chances.

The rain-clouds had blown away and it was moonlight. He laid Maureen O'Vale gently down in the shadow of a chimney, lit a cigaret and sat beside her, watching her still face bathed in the silver-glow, a tug at his heart as he noted the dark lines under her eyes.

"Suppose I'm a fool," he thought, "but I'm getting hit harder the more I see of this girl—and she may be just another hop-head at that."

Abruptly, Maureen took several deep gasping breaths, sighed and opened her eyes, like a person coming out of an anaesthetic. One hand moved up haltingly and brushed across her forehead as she whispered:

"How my head aches! Aches!"

Larry said nothing, only sat and watched her, waiting.

Finally, she saw him, stared, frowned and glanced about the roof. Then, impatiently:

"How did I come here? And who are you?"

Larry chuckled.

"Oh, I'm just the poor goof who tried to get you and himself out of a bad jam about thirty minutes ago, but who seems only to have got both himself and you into a worse one."

"But why are you staying up on this roof?" she asked with puzzled eyes.

Larry smiled whimsically.

"Because the police are raiding the house below; and there are two officers waiting at the foot of that fire escape on the east side of this building, our only mode of exit besides the stairs."

"Arrest *us?*" she stammered, accenting the pronoun.

"I rather fancy. You for shooting up a man at McVicker's; me for perhaps as bad. Don't you remember the scrap I had with that big black brute you tried to bean with my automatic when he had fastened his teeth in my jugular vein?"

She shuddered.

"I remember now. Did you kill him?"

"Don't know," Larry grinned. "But guess I made him feel mighty uncomfortable."

She arose a bit weakly.

"We must get away from here at once."

"Sure," agreed Larry. "How? Fly?"

She frowned impatiently and glanced about the roof. Then:

"Don't be a fool."

"I'm trying not to; but I should think myself rather far on the way toward that state of mind if I went down that fire escape; or tried the stairs to the floors below. I may be in the frying pan, but at least, I know where the fire is."

"Fire!" She seemed suddenly struck with an idea. Then, as she pointed toward the pent-house: "There's a heavy rope in there; it's long enough to reach the ground."

Larry darted toward the pent-house,

coming out a moment later with the rope in his hands.

"If there are no police waiting below on the west side of this building, I think we can reach the ground," he said.

He looped one end of the rope around a chimney top close to the edge of the roof. Then:

"I'll lower you first; then come down myself."

Larry had fastened the rope beneath Maureen O'Vale's shoulders, told her to hold tight to it just above, and was about to lower her over the side when, abruptly, a grim suspicion struck him like a dash of icy water in the face.

"Say," he whispered tensely, "how the devil did you know the rope was in that pent-house?"

She shuddered convulsively, turned her eyes away.

"I can't tell you."

Larry gripped her wrist.

"You've been here before?"

Her great flaming eyes met his and filled with tears.

"Many times," she sobbed. "All too many; but I could not help it." Then: "Don't ask me anything more. If we are to get away, we must hurry."

Sick at heart with the dread thoughts that crowded his mind, Larry lowered her over the side of the building.

A moment later the rope slackened and he began to draw it up again, thinking: "Half a mind not to go down this way, but to take my chances with the police. Probably my chances with them are better than with that girl. One thing, though; she's not a drug fiend. I could tell that by her eyes. But what is she doing in Little Montmartre?"

Then: "What the devil do I care what she's doing here? I'll get away from her while the chance is mine."

He drew the end of the rope over the edge of the building and stared at it. Into the end she had knotted her handkerchief; he caught the sweetly subtle perfume of it, Parma violets! It went to his head!

Crushing the whisp of white linen in his hand, he looked over the side, saw her below; heard her whisper, as softly tender as the caress of a rose petal:

"Come!"

"Well, heaven or hell, that's that," Larry thought. "I'm going to dive in." He let himself over the side and clambered slowly down the rope to find his legs grasped vigorously at the bottom by the stout arms of a uniformed police officer.

Maureen O'Vale was nowhere in sight. Treachery? Perhaps; he did not know.

CHAPTER IV
The "Infant" Appears

HALF an hour later, Larry Shannon was being examined by Dan Brouthers, chief of the River Royal city police force.

"Larry," said the chief with disturbed eyes, "what sort of confounded mischief are you getting mixed up in?"

Brouthers belonged to the Polo Club, played on the same team with Larry, and they were old pals. Then, more emphatically:

"What the merry hell were you doing in Little Montmartre at two o'clock in the morning, boy, shinning down a rope from the most infernally putrid, teetotally damned dive in the whole perpetually cussed place?"

Larry grinned, lit a cigaret, and thoughtfully pondered the question, wondering how much it would be necessary to tell big-hearted Chief Brouthers in order to go free himself—and to bring no harm to Maureen O'Vale.

That she had escaped somewhere; that the man she had shot at McVicker's was still alive, but in the hospital, was information Larry had been able to skilfully worm out of the police officer who had brought him to headquarters.

O'Vale, the officer told Larry, had killed both his men, though several bystanders asserted that it had been in

self defense, a case of kill or be killed, for both of the dead men had drawn their weapons first.

Finally, Larry glanced toward Brouthers, still smiling.

"Chief, I give you my word, I've been in no mischief at all," he said. "Just happened to be passing the place when I heard a woman's cry for help. Being a good-natured sort of Sir Galahad, I rushed inside to her rescue; found her bound and half stupefied with chloroform while a couple of rascally Chinks were trying to make her smoke opium."

Brouthers had been studying Larry's features.

"Yes, that's an old trick in those joints," he said. "They ship them south to the States, after they have them fixed right; sometimes get a thousand dollars apiece, if they're especially handsome girls. Well, what next?"

"I slammed one of the Chinks, an old woman, into a corner; pinked the other and had picked up the girl to carry her out when a big black he-brute appeared and said the girl was his property; tried to stop me and I——"

Brouthers was scowling.

"Wait a bit, Larry. What sort of a looking chap was this man you call a he-brute?"

"Big hairy cuss; weighed two hundred or more—I had him on my chest, so I know his weight—broken nose healed crooked; short black hair that grows down in a point almost to his eyebrows and, by the eternal, he can fight!"

Brouthers nodded.

"The Infant, they call him; he's a chucker-out at Little Montmartre—chiefly, though we suspect other things against him, chiefly white slavery."

"Well, I went to the mat with this Infant," Larry continued. "Put him out; heard the patrol wagon coming; didn't know whether I'd killed him or not and fled to the roof rather than be questioned by the police in the condition I was. I was going down that rope when your man grabbed me."

Relighting his cigaret that had gone out, Larry wondered how much of this story he had got away with.

Brouthers threw back his head and laughed.

"Don't you know you can't drag any herrings across the trail with me, Larry?" he said. "Come across like a well-behaved little boy. Who was the girl? And what became of her?"

Larry's lips tightened. Now would he have to lie like a gentleman.

"Chief," he said earnestly, "I don't really know who she was. I sent her down the rope first and she evidently made her escape before I came down."

Brouthers was not impressed.

"You don't *really* know who she was?" he repeated. Then, like the crack of a whip: "Who the blooming Bunker Hill, then, do you *suspect* she was?"

Larry smiled.

"Can't put anything over on you, Chief, can I? I suspect the young woman may have been Miss Maureen O'Vale, who is on the vaudeville program at McVicker's."

The chief arose and held out his hand with a smile.

"All I wanted to know, Larry," he said. "Guess you were only an innocent bystander, after all."

"Chief, you've been firing a barrage of questions at me for the last ten minutes," said Larry. "May I put one or two?"

"Sure; but I'll have to use my official, not my personal, judgment about answering them."

"What do you know about that girl. Maureen O'Vale and her father?" Larry asked.

Brouthers studied the ash of his cigaret thoughtfully for several minutes. Finally:

"Only this, Larry: O'Vale is a friend of Dave Casson's, and wherever Dave Casson flocks there's certain to be mischief brewing. Casson never earned an honest-to-God clean dollar in all his dis-

reputable days on earth. I've a strong suspicion there's been blood on many of the dollars he's spent.

"Casson's been away a couple of years; part of the time abroad; then up North. One of my men saw him and O'Vale with their heads together just before O'Vale's act went on at McVicker's last night; that's enough to give the man a mighty blue eye."

"What's Casson done?"

Brouthers exploded.

"Everything—and everybody. Bootlegging; running Chinks over the border into the States; whatever will bring him money easiest. We've suspected him of other and worse crimes; we don't know just what he's up to now; so we're keeping careful watch on both him and his pal, 'Shorty' Ferguson."

"What do you know about O'Vale's daughter?"

"Nothing, Larry," the chief answered, "except that Ned Gay climbed on the stage, tried to kiss her and she shot him."

"You're after her, I suppose?"

Brouthers nodded.

"My duty; but, so far, we've not hunted very hard. If Ned Gay dies, we'll have to snap into it."

"All right," said Larry. "That's that, and I'll not bother you any more." He arose to leave.

"Before you go, let me give you this bit of advice, boy"; continued the chief, "anybody that mixes up with Dave Casson is bound, sooner or later, to be crooked, so watch out for O'Vale and don't let him put anything over on you."

"Not unless I'm asleep," said Larry, as he left the building and started toward his own home.

As he stepped from the doorway, a man who had been standing at the curb, apparently waiting for a street car, though several cars had passed without his signalling one to stop, peered covertly into Larry's face and then hurried away. It was "Shorty" Ferguson, Dave Casson's pal.

From behind a curtained window, Chief Brouthers watched Ferguson with a smile.

"A herring across your track, Mr. Dave Casson," the chief murmured. "Rather a low-down trick on Larry, but, if it makes trouble, guess the boy can handle himself all right."

On arriving home, Larry Shannon found that neither Donald Pentwood nor O'Vale were there. They had been there, the housekeeper told him, when he woke her up, but, after getting into dry clothes and eating the meal she had prepared for them, they had left.

"Probably gone down to the river," Larry decided and hurried that way himself.

At the river, Larry found only Joline Beaumarchais, the guide, waiting impatiently and fussing about the canoe load.

"By gar, me, I'm glad you finally show up here!" exclaimed Joline. "I go to sleep and pretty near lose both canoe while you're away."

"Lose them!" Larry exclaimed. "How? There's scarcely a ripple on the river and no wind."

"Thieves!" answered Joline. "Me, I lie asleep in bottom of big canoe when I hear somebody moving around. I look up and see man named Brulé what work for Dave Casson pushing other canoe with duffle on her out into river; trying for steal her while I'm asleep."

"Brulé alone?"

"*Non,*" Joline answered. "He have beeg *bateau* out in river weeth that Dave Casson and 'nother man on board her, mabbe two. They go nord."

"Anybody else with them?"

Joline hesitated, scratching his jaw with ruminative forefinger.

"I done exactly know, but I theenk mabbe they got woman on board. I pull my gun and tell that Brulé for get out here damn queeck or I make hole in hees head—an' he go, damn queeck. When he get on board *bateau,* I theenk I hear woman's cry, like mabbe she been hurt."

"Why the devil didn't you find out?"

Larry snapped, dreading that it had been Maureen O'Vale.

"Wall," Joline answered, "I never like for meex in any woman's trouble excep' my own wife, an' she geeve me quite plenty, thank you, *m'sieu.*"

His mind filled with anxiety for Maureen O'Vale, Larry was studying what to do when he heard footsteps approaching; a moment later, Donald Pentwood's voice called:

"You old pagan, where the devil you been? Sending me up to the house with that cockeyed booze hound and then cutting out. Thought I'd never get rid of the old rummy. Went back to the corner where I left you and found the police in possession. An officer said they'd taken you to headquarters. I went there, saw Chief Brouthers, and found you'd left."

"Yes," answered Larry sternly, "and what did you do with O'Vale? Didn't I tell you to stick to him?"

"The heck you did!" exclaimed Pentwood. "You only told me to get him into dry clothes and something hot into his stomach. That being my limit, I took the rummy out on the street to lose him. He met Dave Casson; Dave said he knew where O'Vale's daughter was and the two went off together toward the river. I became emphatically elsewhere the minute O'Vale turned his back."

"Well, that's that," said Larry. "Now let's get going. We ought to have been on our way hours ago."

Larry's worst fears were confirmed; he was certain that it had been Maureen O'Vale aboard the *bateau* and he was determined now to catch up with them. Though it might be running his nose into danger to mix in Dave Casson's affairs, he could not find it possible to desert Maureen O'Vale in her time of trouble.

After all, he thought, he owed his life to Maureen, and it would be little to do in return if he were to stake it against the chance of rescuing her from men he was certain meant her harm.

CHAPTER V

Night—and Silence Under the Pines

La Riviere du Roi has often been called the stream of a thousand pleasures. Flowing for the greater part of its way toward Great Storm Lake, due north, but sometimes twisting until it runs east and west, or west and east, as the mood strikes it, not the least of its delights is to make a turn in its northern course and come abruptly upon the pearl and tawny amber of a glorious Canadian dawn. Life can show you few things more soul-filling and beautiful.

In spite of the turmoil of sinister doubts that crowded his mind this morning, Larry Shannon, racing ahead in the lighter-loaded canoe with Joline Beaumarchais, was able to enjoy the river with keenest zest.

To begin with, the stream was the doorway to his beloved North, than which no country lay closer to his heart, and Larry had drunk deep of the Swiss Alpine without being in any measure weaned from the tender cobalt blue of Canada. Nowhere else did he feel quite such a sense of mental exhilaration and physical well being.

"You come along as best you can," he had told Pentwood, who always lazed on the river. "Jo and I will make camp at the end of what we think should be a fair day's canoe journey and wait."

"Planning sweet and pretty, aren't you," Pentwood grumbled. "Sociable time I'll have, all by my wild lone, liable to be eaten by flocks of ferocious bears and wolves."

"That's the penalty you pay for being so fat and juicy," chaffed Larry. "But don't worry; the bears and wolves are too well fed to bother with a crab like you at this season."

"I've got a shrewd suspicion you're chasing that golden madonna of yours, you big moon-calf," scoffed Pentwood. "Think the lady's got you hypnotized."

Larry caught him by the shoulder.

"You blamed fathead," he exploded. "I am going after her; not because I'm in love with her, but because it's my duty. I think she's being taken north by Dave Casson against her will."

Pentwood startled the echoes of the morning with derisive laughter.

"On your way, Sir Knight of the Itching Fist!" he cried. "I hope you get all the ruckus you're looking for. From what I know of Dave Casson, I think you will, too."

At the end of seven hours steady paddling, turn and turn about, Larry and Joline Beaumarchais saw ahead of them a Cree coming leisurely down the river on a raft made from three ten-foot logs lashed together. It was the first human being they had met since the first hour away from River Royal, for this was the season of light travel.

Joline Beaumarchais, paddling in the stern, called to Larry:

"Now we fin' out something about *bateau, m'sieu;* we ask theese Indian."

As the craft approached close, Joline called: "Hello, John! You meet big *bateau* on river this morning?"

For a moment the Cree stared at them solemnly. Then:

"You speak 'bout *bateau* weeth patch on sail?"

It was Larry who answered:

"Yes, a new patch on an old sail."

The Indian turned and studied the water behind him before he answered:

"Yes, I see her 'bout two hour ago, mabbe t'ree."

Joline tossed a double cut of black twist tobacco into the Indian's canoe—put in the duffle bag especially for native consumption, since no one but a copper-stomached savage could have chewed the stuff and lived—and without another word the Cree paddled on his way.

For four hours Joline and Larry followed the river, yet saw not the slightest sign of a *bateau*. And there was only the mildest of winds; a heavy *bateau* with a sail could not make much faster time than a canoe; in places she would not do as well; if the Cree had told the truth they should have overtaken the craft hours ago.

"Guess we might as well make camp and rest up," Larry said to Joline as they paused in a long straight stretch of the river and he scanned the water ahead through his binoculars. "Nothing in sight; and I promised Pen we'd make camp and wait for him, anyway."

The camp was soon made and a savory meal cooked by skilful Joline Beaumarchais. Larry ate with an outdoorsman's appetite, and that means one to which bare dry bread and coffee can taste like food for gods, but he was feeling tremendously anxious.

Was he being a fool after all, he reflected, as he finished the meal, lit his pipe and sat watching the river; this wild-goose flight into the North after a beautiful girl? Worse, a girl mixed up with a gang of unquestionable cutthroats and crooks? And what were Dave Casson and O'Vale hurrying into the North for at this late season of the year? In three weeks, perhaps before, the big snows would come. O'Vale's journey might be to avoid arrest, so too Maureen, but that did not explain Casson.

"There's an African in the fuel-pile somewhere," Larry concluded. "If my hunch is worth anything, there is a whole mob of Africans—or Dave Casson wouldn't be trekking North at this season. But, wait a moment; I'm not sure he *is* going North. There's a chance that he surmised some one might be following, pulled his *bateau* up on shore, concealed it and started back. Otherwise, it seems as if we ought to have caught up with them long before this."

Dusk fell, a silver starlit night descended and still no sign of Donald Pentwood.

"He ought to have made it," Larry remarked to Joline as he went up the bank to where the guide had pitched the tent and sat beside the fire, smoking.

"Sure," Joline agreed. "He come all way weeth current. Eef he jus' float

he ought to reach here before midnight."

"Afraid something may have happened to the boy," said Larry anxiously. "If he doesn't show up soon, you'd better leave the duffle here, take the canoe and prospect up the river a way."

Came midnight and no Pentwood. They waited another hour for good measure; then Joline piled the duffle on shore and disappeared in the darkness up-river, occasionally pausing to shout, in case Pentwood might have moored his canoe close to shore and be asleep.

Larry, sitting beside the fire, listening to Joline's calls growing fainter and fainter in the distance, was becoming more worried.

"Everything's gone wrong on this trip since the start," he thought.

Then, jacking himself up, he concluded:

"That's apple-sauce; perhaps everything's going precisely right and it only looks wrong on the outside. We can't ever see around the corner of the future; fortunate, perhaps, that we can't, or we might not have the courage to face it. Life's an adventure; I'm getting a taste of the hot of it; and I'm not so sure but that I like it, too."

Then, as he dropped asleep:

"Whatever happens; I'm not going to lose faith in *her!*"

Some time later Larry Shannon opened his eyes suddenly with the creepy, intangible feeling that something or somebody, was near him in the black dark. The fire had died down to a glowing, feathery ash; Joline had been gone more than an hour.

Throwing on fresh fuel, Larry shook himself, muttering: "Nightmare, I guess. Too much supper and not enough exercise afterward."

Then, abruptly, a voice, hard and biting, out of the shadowed darkness:

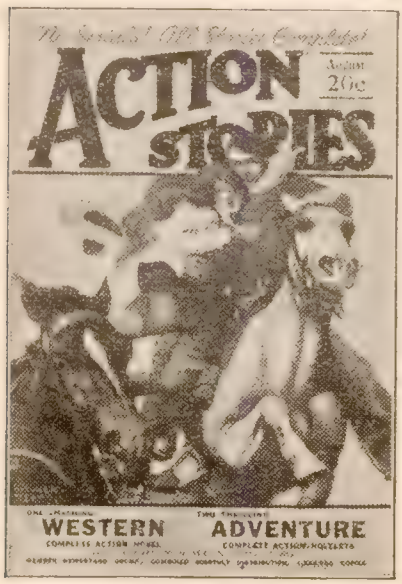
"Hold up your hands, mister, *and keep 'em up.*"

Larry, seeing no one, hesitated.

"Quick!"

From the shadows, Larry caught the gleam of the firelight on a leveled automatic, and lifted his arms above his head.

(Part II in Sept. North•West Stories)



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By Nels Leroy Jorgensen

Old Southwest—saying good-bye to a Mexican general isn't always final

THE long-barreled Colt .45 which faced him as he reined in on the dusty roadside, failed to perturb "Tony" Wheeler as much as it might have. Of late, he had begun to feel at home only when in trouble of one kind or another. He had been in and out of it continuously since the day when his father had died, almost ten years before, and he had had to leave his school for mining engineers in New York to make his own way in the world.

Besides, the holder of the weapon seemed less disposed to shoot than to talk. That helped a lot. A man out to kill doesn't want to talk about it.

The road was empty. Only three hours since, Tony had ridden across the international border between United States and Mexico at Bajada, cantering quietly, his mind full of the exquisite sunniness of the day and the peace of nature. And now, two miles or so north of Palmiras, which was his destination, this was his greeting.

The Mexican, who was seated on a big boulder, wore some sort of uniform: Tony was not certain just what it purported to represent. And in the brown hand not occupied with the revolver, was an official-looking paper. Tony smiled. His smile, which did not, however, include the steely blue of his eyes, was his first attack.

"You want me, *señor?*" he inquired politely.

"*Si.*" The Mexican nodded and squinting his dark eyes in what he evidently believed was a most savage fashion, lounged to his feet. Tony Wheeler dropped the bridle across his mount's neck as he leaned forward idly, his left arm across the pommel. The fingers of his right hand moved casually toward his holster. He watched musingly as the Mexican drew the paper open.

"You are th' Señor Wheeler, eh?"

"*Si!*" Tony replied graciously, wondering swiftly how his presence here in Lower California had already been discovered. He was not impressed with a sense of his own importance beyond a certain point and he would have sworn that not a soul in the world—except possibly, one, knew of his coming to Palmiras.

"I have a warrant for your arrest!"

The Mexican suddenly exhibited a flashy badge and Tony's eyes opened just a trifle wider. He put out his hand casually.

"I am certain it is a mistake," he volunteered easily. "Is that the paper? Let me see it."

He scanned it quickly. It was most certainly a warrant for his arrest, drawn up in the township of Palmiras. Tony could read Spanish with ease. But it was signed, he observed, not by a police officer; instead, by one Manuel Torquidas, *alcaide* of the village. Tony's mind worked rapidly.

He had been in Palmiras before — two years before, in one of his many venturings about the world. Torquidas had not been *alcaide* then; he remembered distinctly a grave-faced, courteous old Don with whom he had been very friendly. Times had changed. Why should the *alcaide* of Palmiras be drawing up warrants for his arrest? Torquidas—he must remember the name!

The hand on his belt had suddenly found the holster. Tony crumpled the warrant into a little ball and smiled icily at the officer. The latter stared in stupefaction.

The moment was enough.

"You see," smiled Tony, "there is no longer a warrant!"

As he spoke, his pistol whipped into sight and spoke once. The forty-five dropped from the Mexican's hand and a stain of blood spread over his fingers. He gave a howl of rage and pain and sprang backward, reaching for the knife in his red sash, at the very instant that Tony, leaping clear over his mount's neck, bounded into the roadside. The Mexican tumbled flat on his back, Tony atop of him.

IT was about ten minutes afterward that Tony again took up his way toward Palmiras. Behind him in a little gully, the Mexican police officer lay securely trussed by a lasso from his own saddle, but his wounded hand had been well cleaned and bandaged. Tony was whistling when he reached the long, dusty thoroughfare that was Palmiras' main street.

No town in Mexico, however small, is complete without its main square, or *plaza*. Even Palmiras insisted upon boasting one of these, sleepy and unvisited though it was. Only in Palmiras, the *plaza* consisted of a discouraged-looking fountain, that played on, day and night in a tiny square surrounded by bedraggled palms and flanked on all four sides by squat, unimpressive public buildings and one small *cantina*.

Tony halted before emerging upon the *plaza*, sleepy in the heat of the hazy mid-afternoon. For some reason, he told himself, he was not wanted in this town; he couldn't for the life of him puzzle out why. Perhaps it wasn't the town; perhaps it was only the man who had made out the warrant, he who would, by virtue of his position, be all-powerful in this isolated place on the eastern coast — Torquidas, the *alcaide*.

Two years before he had been there; outwardly the place had not changed in the merest trifle. Two years before, he and old Cap Martell, typical wandering prospector of the southern *Sierras*, had staked out a claim on the mountainside east of the town, overlooking the blue waters of the Gulf of California.

It had been a mad chance, that claim. He'd helped to stake it because he was fond of old Cap, not because he held any hope that Cap's dreams of wealth would ever be realized. The latter had come to him one day with the story that in that claim in the mountain, a band of smugglers, since dis-

banded by the Mexican Government, had hidden a treasure.

Truly enough, the enormous cave which their claim covered had been the rendezvous of the most notorious band of smugglers on the eastern coast of the peninsula. But once he and Cap had begun exploration of the cave, a sense of futility had come upon him. The place was enormous—big enough and deep enough to conceal a full regiment, and bayonetted with passageways and sub-caverns.

The wanderlust had come upon Tony again. He left Cap searching for the treasure and went north into the Panhandle, where for the last six months, after a year and a half of aimless wandering, he had been rustling cows.

Then had come the letter. He had known Cap had a daughter at school somewhere in the Eastern states, but that was all. Cap was dead. His daughter had taken up the search for the treasure. Tony drew the crumpled letter from his pocket and read again:

"Dear Mr. Wheeler,

I know you and father owned this claim jointly and father has died. I was with him when it happened; and his belief that the treasure is somewhere in the cave was so deep that I believe, too.

I'm going to look for it. I need the money. And I'm telling you so as to be fair. If you want to come and help me, I'd like to have you. Suit yourself.

ALICE MARTELL."

Tony smiled. Sounded business-like and brusque. Alice must be different from her old father, that lovable dreamer of riches to whom riches actually would have been a burden, whose greatest pleasure Tony knew to be his eternal search for them.

But the letter, as he perused it again, gave him a sudden idea. Suppose the girl's renewed search for the treasure was connected in some way with Torquidas? Suppose Torquidas wanted to keep him out of Palmiras because he knew the treasure to be there?

Tony's eyes narrowed in the way they had. He was not particularly interested in riches; life was too full of good things at it was—the open road and the new horizon with each dawn. But Cap's daughter...the open road, and such things, were not for a girl. If treasure were there, she needed it.

His jaws tightened. Torquidas could handle a girl. But he'd have a harder time handling—Tony Wheeler.

Trouble again!

Tony grinned. Two or three Mexicans standing in the doorway of the *cantina* were watching him where he had halted on the western side of the *plaza*. He lifted his bridle and moved forward. He was beginning to feel at home again in Palmiras.

CHAPTER II

Until Another Day

THE idlers in front of the *cantina* had moved out of sight immediately his intention to visit the place became apparent. Tony dropped his reins over the sagging hitching post and moved to the door.

There were several men in the cool interior of the *cantina,* lounging in various attitudes about the bar, but all of them had their eyes on the door. Some furtively, others frankly; but Tony was aware that he was the target of every eye. He moved toward the bar with his languid, graceful tread—a tread so light that it had to it a suggestion of the stalking panther. But his right hand was very near his holster.

Before he had quite reached the rail, one of the Mexicans stepped in his path. The man was a slender, swarthy individual and the pistol he carried reposed lightly in a gaudy, silver-studded holster. His hand, too, rested very near the butt of his weapon.

"You are th' Señor Wheeler?" The voice was a purr.

Tony smiled. He was evidently well known.

"In person," he acknowledged, with a little bow. "And you?"

"I am Carridas!"

Tony's left eyebrow drew down appraisingly. The name had been couched in a confident voice—the voice of a bully who expects his name to bring trembling to all who hear. Tony simply waited.

"There is a frand of mine," Carridas murmured. "A ver-ry good frand. Did you happen to meet him on th' road, *Señor?* 'E was an officer of th' police. Per'aps you remember?"

Tony smiled again. "I did meet a man." His face grew grave. "If he is a friend of yours, I am sure he is waiting for you, *señor.* You will find him in a little *coulee,* about two miles back. He will not leave until you come."

Carridas' brows drew down and his dark eyes flashed.

"You jest, *señor!*" he began ominously. "*Por Dios!* It cannot be possible you have left a frand of mine—on the road?"

"Just possible," Tony murmured. "He is there—and as I said, he will not leave until you come. He can't!"

"Draw!"

It was a command. Carridas stepped backward to the end of the bar. There was a sudden movement on the part of the others in the place for cover.

Two shots came at once and the acrid smell of powder filled the room.

Carridas fell back against the bar, his head jerking forward, and the pistol slowly loosed itself from his nerveless fingers. Tony Wheeler still stood erect and his pistol, as he stood there, wavered in a short arc that covered every corner of the *cantina.*

Carridas' slump grew more pronounced. He slid to the floor with a little groan. But his eyes still flamed; his head came up.

"To him!" he cried in Spanish.

Tony's pistol barked again as one of the loungers drew erect and fired. The bartender ducked from sight behind his bottles. There was a space of utter confusion.

A bottle sailed across the room and Tony just drew in his head in time. He fired at the wielder and made a dash for the dark corner in the rear. He was trapped. Two shots whizzed past his sombrero as he tumbled into the cover he made by overturning a table in passing.

The Mexicans were all under shelter.

There came a sudden lull, in which the confused cries of a number of people outside in the street, became heard. Tony crouched farther down behind his tipped-up table and with his foot, managed to drag over another. Behind him was a window, he discovered when he looked up. But to reach it was an impossible feat.

He would have to stand erect and he knew that the minute he did that, he would draw a hail of fire. Every one of the loungers in the place, he understood now, was out to get him. Carridas was motionless; blood ebbed slowly from a wound in his neck which Tony felt rather glad was not mortal.

A voice outside cried,

"Torquidas!" Another, "*El alcaide!*"

There was a clutching silence. Tony watched through a slit and became aware of a new figure in the *cantina.*

Torquidas was standing in the doorway. He was a tall man—taller than Tony and gracefully slender. There was a studied arrogance about him as he paused there, flashily costumed in the native manner, with a gaudy sombrero, silver-studded belt, and wearing a small, fastidious mustache. Torquidas was a handsome man — handsome and superbly confident.

Tony had no wish to put an end to him, even though he knew the man now for an enemy. Taking life was not his portion; he seldom shot to kill, flashy though he was on the draw. Killing was to Tony a matter for self-defense only.

But Torquidas was too confident. Tony refilled his half-emptied pistol and aiming carefully, fired three times in rapid succession. Torquidas' sombrero with its gaudily beaded brim, bounced from his sleek head and two spurts of dust came from under his feet. Tony laughed jeeringly.

With an oath, the *alcaide* of Palmiras made for cover with his henchmen. A volley of shots from every corner of the room ploughed ineffectively about Tony's defenses. Then there was silence again—silence broken by the harsh whisper of Torquidas' voice as he directed the stealthy movements of his men.

They were creeping about the floor. In a minute he would be subjected to a crossfire. Tony bit his lip. In this position, he could hold out for only a short time longer. He had been in too many tight places during his adventurous career to give way to despair; but as he looked around him, he admitted to himself that his position was as near to hopeless as it had ever been.

The only thing was the window and he knew that to attempt that meant certain death. A dozen bullets would riddle his body before he could even touch the sill above him.

As though Torquidas could read his thoughts, came the *alcaide's* voice.

"There is no hope for you, Senor Wheeler. If you do not surrender to the law, you will die where you are!"

"I don't like the methods of your law, Señor Alcaide," Tony replied in an even voice. "I'm Tony Wheeler. Come and take me!"

The defi was voiced as much to keep up his own courage as anything else. Too, Tony believed in the thousandth chance; which might not come until the last second. Before the echo of his voice had died, it came.

"Tony Wheeler!"

It was a woman's voice. "I thought so!" she added. Tony peered over the edge of his defenses to find her in the doorway, a slim, confident young figure in puttees and riding breeches, a Stetson cocked rakishly over her short brown hair. Her eyes were laughing, too. In her hand was a light automatic which swept the room, covering Torquidas and his men effectively from behind.

"You'd better take the window, Tony Wheeler. Run around and join me here. I'll keep these rats in good behavior."

Tony hesitated barely a second. This must be Alice Martell. He drew a deep breath. Brusque and competent he had called her, upon reading her letter. Rather that!

He drew erect, shoved his pistol into its holster, and his long form dove through the window. There was not a shot fired.

Scrambling to his feet in the dust of the corral outside, he darted toward the front of the *cantina.* The girl was still there. One horse beside his own was at the hitching rack. He led them both to the doorway. The girl laid her hand on the bridle without turning.

Before she moved, she found Torquidas, half hidden behind an overturned table.

"We seem unable to dispense with your presence, Señor Alcaide," she laughed. "So I suppose I must say—*Hasta mañana!*"

Tony grinned and sprang into his saddle just as the girl's feet found her stirrups. One of the Mexicans in the *cantina* sprang erect and raised a pistol. but Tony had been ready. His own weapon spoke just a second before the other's, and the man whirled about, his hands to his eyes, with a cry of amazement and pain.

Their spurs dug into the animals' flanks and the two were off down the dusty road. On leaving the *plaza,* Tony drew up slightly to permit her taking the lead.

"To the east!" she cried, looking back over her shoulder. "They won't follow far."

CHAPTER III
New Partners

THERE was no pursuit.

Tony and the girl rode for almost five miles, directly east of Palmiras along a road that wound along the base of the mountains toward the sea, without exchanging a word, at a fierce gallop. "I guess we're safe," he ventured at last, slackening his pace. "They don't seem to be following."

"They wouldn't!" the girl breathed contemptuously. "Not in the open."

She drew in beside him.

He looked at her with more interest. First he had admired her coolness and the slim, boyish confidence of her. Now he noticed how well she rode and how capable, yet genuinely feminine, were the slender white hands holding her bridle. Courage or not, she seemed entirely woman to him then.

"So you're Alice Martell," he smiled.

She smiled in return.

"And you're Tony Wheeler."

Putting out her hand, she added, "We're partners, I think, and we haven't yet shaken on it."

Leaning across the saddle, he took her hand and pressed it. The electric touch of her fingers sent a tingle through him. So this was old Cap Martell's daughter! He was glad he'd taken her up on her note.

"Torquidas, I gather," he said, "is more or less opposed to our being here."

"Rather!" she laughed. "He's been making things disagreeable for me ever since I arrived. And my letter to you must have gone through the postoffice at Palmiras, so he probably judged you were on your way from seeing it."

"That accounts for everything," Tony nodded, and then proceeded to tell her of the attempt made to arrest him before he had entered the town.

Alice Martell laughed.

"I'm glad you came, though," she said soberly. "I'm not exactly afraid of them, but a woman alone can do only so much. And they're afraid of you; I can see that. Even *I* have heard of your reputation—with a gun."

"It's been forced on me," he assured her. "I don't look like a trouble-hunter, I hope."

"I was afraid you would be that," she frowned, and was silent for a space. Tony found himself waiting eagerly for her to go on, without realizing that for the first time in his arrogant young career he was going to care for one woman's opinion of himself.

She looked up smiling.

"But you're not that, I can see. Dad said you simply had a habit of walking into trouble."

"Exactly," he assured her, and sighed. "Where are we headed for now? This territory looks familiar."

"It should. We're going to the shack," she answered. "Yours and dad's. It's still intact and weatherproof. I've been living there and so far Torquidas hasn't attempted to dislodge me."

"He can't," Tony said gravely. "I'm quite sure he wouldn't dare attempt that. The land is ours and the claim is properly filed. It'd be a bit too raw. Mexico is civilized to some degree, anyhow. But what I can't make out is, why he wants to get us out of here."

"I haven't found that out either," she confessed. "I only know I can't get near the cave. There are always men around there—disreputable looking creatures who carry rifles and warn me off. And—and Chinamen."

"Chinamen?" he echoed.

"A few. You can see one or two of them around the cave at almost any hour of the day."

Tony whistled.

"Now what the devil! Chinks — in Palmiras! Is that all you know?"

"Just about all," she acknowledged. "I haven't been able to get near enough to the cave to find out more. Last night there came a terrible noise from there, like a battery of machine guns, only—only more so. I thought they

were trying to frighten me out, so I put out the lights inside the shack and waited. But nothing happened. To tell the truth, I was a bit scared."

"I don't blame you!" Tony exclaimed, his eyes narrowing. He was conscious of a sudden rage inside himself at the vision of this girl, alone, making her pitifully determined stand against Torquidas and his disreputable crowd. And he was tremendously glad that he had come to Palmiras.

They reached the shack as dusk was coming on. Tony inspected it mutely. He looked up to find the girl's eyes upon him, from where she stood in the doorway, a slender, wistful figure, suddenly very womanlike and appealing.

"It's all—quite as I left it," he murmured, gazing about the single room littered with cooking and sleeping apparatus which had been rendered into slightly more presentable shape since he had last seen it.

"Cap and I weren't exactly graduates of a domestic science school, I guess. You've made it a bit more—more livable," he finished, at a loss.

"Thank you," she said simply and then impulsively swept across to him and took his hand. "You're very kind, Tony Wheeler. Kind and tactful and good. I know you were dad's best friend and I want you to know that I'm grateful to you for coming."

Tony looked deep into her eyes, luminous in the swift-gathering dusk, and thought them the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen.

"I'm glad I came, too," he replied gravely, "—somehow!"

They cooked a hasty supper over a wood fire that he built in front of the shack and then sat talking for more than an hour; while the stars appeared overhead one by one. There was no sound from the direction of the cave on the mountain slope behind them; it almost seemed as though Torquidas had been willing to grant them this one evening unmolested.

At last Tony threw away his fifth cigaret and got to his feet. He whistled and his horse came into the circle of firelight.

"My bedding's on Rover's back," he explained coolly. "Him and me's going down by the spring to camp."

She nodded quietly and got up.

"Goodnight," she said simply. The door to the shack closed.

Tony watched it musingly. Was it only the stars and the silver swathe that the moonlight made on the waters of the gulf below—only the night and its witchery? Or had there been something else in her eyes when she looked at him before she left? Was it only the spell of the night and a beautiful girl or had the little shack taken on a new meaning for him—a meaning that had had no place in his wanderer's life—home.

He heaved a great sigh and turned away. Facing the east, he had a sweep of the lazy slope of the mountain at his feet, across the Gulf of California as far as the night would permit; and southward, the tiny lights on Montague Island glimmered faintly.

The shack stood on the lower slope of Sierra de los Cupapas and below it, the Colorado River, creeping its winding way down through Arizona and Mexico, effected its junction with the Rio Nuevo and the Gulf at once. It was a quiet spot and almost deserted by man. An ideal rendezvous, thought Tony, for the smugglers who had once made it their headquarters.

Across the Gulf lay the coast of Sonora, Mexico proper, but by following the Colorado River up for only about fifty miles, one reached United States soil. An ideal spot for dark work. He wondered if the fates had willed that he and Alice should find the smugglers' treasure. Something in his heart told him that there was no failure with a woman like her; it gave him new courage.

He moved slowly down the slope, Rover stepping obediently at his heels. Perhaps, he reflected, the loss of freedom in life that women had always

stood for to him, was made up for by the sensing that there was something deeper and more real for which to live and work.

His sigh was broken off by a sudden sharp exclamation.

The stillness of the night suddenly evaporated. From behind him—directly behind and higher up the slope in the direction of the cave, there grew a mighty sound, pressing in insistently upon his eardrums and growing louder and louder with each second—as though some fiery god had descended from the heavens upon the slope of *de los Cucapos!*

CHAPTER IV
Mysteries From the Sky

He had an impulse to flatten himself upon the ground as the sound bore down upon him through the darkness. Then suddenly he straightened.

The looming hulk took shape out of the shadows at the very moment that he placed the sound. It was a giant airplane, with two enormous motors fanning the air.

But it was a bigger ship than any he had ever seen, and strangely out of place on this lonely spot. Surely it was not a government plane and yet what private individual in Palmiras could afford such a monster, he wondered?

"A passenger ship!" he gasped, as the great bird slid past him above the shack and took wing, gracefully rising from the ground and slipping out into the darkness over the gulf, without a light or warning, or any sound other than its powerful motors.

The sound of its passage melted gradually into the distance until it was gone and then silence returned to the slope. Far below, he could hear the waters lapping at the rocky shore. The silence was ghostly after the terrific noise of the plane.

Although his mind remained active for hours in his attempt to account for the presence of the plane and Torquidas' actions about the cave, he at last dropped off into a deep, cool sleep. When he awoke, the sun had been up for two hours and Rover's soft nose was pressing against his thigh.

Alice Martell was frying bacon in front of the shack and coffee was steaming over the fire.

"I'm lazy," he apologized. "Did you discover what the noise meant last night?"

"Was it a plane?" she demanded. "I half believed it was and I've been dying to ask you."

He nodded.

"A monster passenger carrier."

She shook her head. "It's all beyond me, I'm afraid. Or perhaps," she smiled, "it's just because you're here and I've slipped responsibility off my shoulders."

"It's just as well," Tony smiled, his eyes narrowing as they sought the trail below them, which, rounding a spur in the otherwise smooth hillside, ran directly from Palmiras to the shack, with a branch just this side of the spur, which led upward to the cave mouth.

"Expecting company?" he mused.

She looked up and gave a little start. Four riders had come into view on the trail below, just having rounded the spur below the cave. Three were indistinguishable at that distance. The third—

"It's Torquidas!" she exclaimed.

Tony jumped to his feet and dodging behind the shack, whistled for Rover. "I'm going," he called back. "I'll be near at hand if you need me, but I don't intend to let them walk up and take me off."

She nodded quiet acceptance. She seemed to have left everything to him since his arrival and to accept his every judgment without a murmur. Tony mounted and made off up the trail that wound behind the shack into the denser fastnesses of the Cucapas on the slope above. Once safely within the shelter

of the forest that clothed the slope at this point, he halted and hobbled his mount.

Then he proceeded to pick his way carefully back toward the shack, about half a mile below him. The ground sloped very suddenly behind the shack and almost made a rear wall for it, but the peak of the front wall hid those around the fire from his sight.

He loosed the pistol in his belt as he approached. He could hear from his security in the bushes behind the place, almost every word that was said in front. Torquidas was speaking.

"Your cavalier ran away again. It seems to be his best accomplishment."

Tony smiled softly to himself.

"He will come back," came the girl's steady, assured voice. He thrilled at the confidence it held.

He heard Torquidas take a step forward.

"He will not be back in time for me to tell him to get out of here!" he exclaimed. "So I tell you. If you are not out of this shack by tomorrow morning—*señorita,* I turn my pack loose!"

The words had an ominous sound. Tony leaned forward to where he could see just over the edge of the roof. He gasped. With Torquidas were the three men he had seen on the trail. One of them was Carridas, the bully he had wounded in the *cantina* the day before. Carridas' throat was heavily bandaged, but he looked ferocious as ever.

But the other two men were Chinamen!

Yellow men with masks for faces and carrying themselves with an assiduous confidence rare among their kind on a foreign shore. Vicious looking knives with long handles adorned their silken belts. They carried no firearms.

"By tomorrow morning," Torquidas repeated. He gestured to the two Orientals. "And these—are part of the pack!"

The girl shrank backward involuntarily. The yellow men grinned evilly. Tony drew in the breath between his teeth and his muscles tightened. He leaped forward.

With the same movement, the pistol came from his holster. He landed easily on both feet, straightening with a catlike grace at the edge of the roof, his legs spread apart and his pistol covering the four men coolly.

"Speaking of moving, Torquidas," he said quietly. "I think it's about time for you to accept your own suggestions. *Vamos—pronto!"*

The yellow men stepped backward. Carridas snarled, but he kept his hands away from his pistol and moved back toward his mount. Torquidas hesitated, glaring upward.

"I didn't come back to talk," Tony went on. "I'll give you just ten seconds to move, Torquidas, and then I start shootin'. Man, I hate to have my breakfast interrupted by things that take my appetite away."

For a space, he and the *alcaide* stared each other in the eye. Carridas made an impatient gesture and mounted. The Chinaman followed suit, turning back over the trail uneasily. Torquidas shook a clenched fist at his enemy.

"This doesn't end it, Señor Wheeler," he snarled. "As your *compadre* here said yesterday — *hasta manana!"*

"Tomorrow," drawled Tony, "we'll still be here. If I were you, Torquidas, I wouldn't be too sure about that, myself."

The *alcaide* cursed in Spanish and swung into his saddle. In another moment, he and his henchmen were riding down the trail. Tony leaped lightly to the ground.

"I intended to keep out of sight," he said ruefully. "Where there's an unknown quantity, there is a certain amount of fear. Torquidas wouldn't have been sure what I was up to."

He sighed and shrugged.

"Oh, well, let's have some breakfast."

Alice was smiling.

"It's very serious, I know," she said,

"but I like the way you have—of popping up and down, but never staying—"

"Popped!" he finished, laughing. His eyes grew grave. "But it *is* serious," he said. "Once he lets his pack loose, we're as good as gone, even if he does have to face consequences afterward. Unless we could get the goods on him and call the Rurales. . . ."

He mused, staring at the hot simmering horizon. Alice watched him.

"Unless we have the goods on him," he repeated. "And then, if there are any to get, we'll get them tonight!"

CHAPTER V
By the Light of the Moon

NIGHT had scarcely fallen before Tony was on his way toward the cave above the shack. He skirted the grassy, almost level stretch of slope which the plane had used the night before for its take-off and made a circuit within the line of trees which came down from above. Consequently he was under cover until he was within fifty feet of the mouth of the cave.

Three small wood fires were lighted and about the entrance there was an air of subdued activity. A good number of men stood about; among them he recognized Torquidas and Carridas, as well as the two Chinamen who had appeared at the shack that morning.

In the black, yawning mouth of the cavern, as he watched, Tony became aware of the wide wings of the big aeroplane. The firelight tinted their silvery substance; the great propellers were still.

Torquidas gave a nervous glance down the slope toward the shack from time to time and spoke frequently, with little, uncertain gestures, to Carridas, who stayed always near him wherever he moved. Tony caught his breath. In the light of the fires, he now made out a number of Chinamen standing about aimlessly, as if waiting. An inkling of what was going to happen began to come to him.

Finally, after a great deal of scurrying about, the plane emerged on a little open space and an aviator who was undoubtedly an American, adjusted his cap and goggles. Another American jumped into the cockpit that was well forward and two Mexicans sprang for the propellers.

Tony saw without interest, an armed Mexican spring into a small seat in the rear of the big body.

Torquidas shouted an order and the numerous Chinamen, herded like sheep, by the two who had been the *alcaide's* familiars, filed into the big body of the plane. Tony counted them. At least twenty-five entered and they must have been packed like cattle inside, he reflected.

The propellers whirled. The Mexicans standing about sprang from its path and with a last shout, the plane moved forward slowly down the slope. In another minute it had been lost to sight and hearing.

Tony drew a long breath. It was quite clear now why Torquidas wanted them out of the way. He was smuggling Chinamen across into United States!

As he waited, Tony mapped out the entire scheme. The plane would cross the gulf, narrow at this point, and head north along the Colorado — why, it would be above the fort at Yuma in about an hour! Two trips nightly could be made easily if necessary.

What a grand plot! And Torquidas could collect anything from a hundred dollars per head, up, for the negotiation, according to how much the ignorant yellow men possessed. They could cross the Colorado River above Yuma and be in California, on the American side of the line and just across from Bajada, Mexico. From there, the going was easy.

Tony waited until two of the fires had died and a little group of the plotters had congregated about the last. A bot-

tle was produced; Torquidas took the first big swallow, followed by his lieutenant, and then it passed around. There was a great deal of laughter and much talk; and once or twice, Tony caught the echo of his own name. But he did not care to risk discovery by crawling sufficiently near to hear what they were saying.

He knew enough.

Crawling backward cautiously, he was at last safely out of hearing and above the shack once more. Rover was tied very near. Alice Martell came to the door when he whistled. The moon had just come up and the night was still and very clear.

"I'm heading west," he said, when he had told her of what he has discovered. "I think we can claim the protection of the Rurales now!"

She nodded calmly. Tony hesitated.

"You're not afraid to be here in the morning—alone?" he asked her, his mind on Torquidas' threat.

She shook her head. "I can run, anyhow," she said.

He rode away with a vision of her deep, steady blue eyes and the remembrance of her woman's pluck. He hadn't known women were that way; he'd thought they were creatures to be protected and pampered—not willing to accept and brave dangers beside men like himself.

Old Cap's daughter...

Rover trod quietly over the smooth road where it ran below the cavern. But once beyond the spur of rock and on the long trail westward, Tony rode low over his mount's neck and the miles unrolled swiftly behind them.

Palmiras was asleep when he pounded through at a gallop. The Rurales' station lay ten miles beyond, on the westward trail that ran across the lower branch of the Cucapas. The moon had paled and the night had taken on a new chill when Tony drew bridle before the tiny barracks set in a little gully on the lower slope.

He thought he remembered the commandant; if he did, the thing would be easier, he reflected. The trooper who halted him acknowledged his name and called for the guard to arouse *Capitan* Carmoros.

Tony breathed more easily when a young, sober-faced officer appeared sleepily from the interior of a tiny building set apart from the barracks. Carmoros remembered him of old; they shook hands warmly.

Inside the shack, just as dawn was coming to the east, Tony related his story. Carmoros listened attentively. When it was finished, he nodded and said:

"I've known about this, but you've discovered the secret that evaded me. Chinamen have been going through here in droves, but I have been unable to trace them. Can we catch them tonight, you think?"

"Easily. I imagine they make at least one trip every twenty-four hours; they could make more if they wanted to."

"If they could get you and this lady out of the way!" Carmoros amended. As he got to his feet, he added, "But do not forget that some of the conspirators are Americans—the aviators, you say. There should be American officers on the scene."

"Impossible!" Tony exclaimed. Then he brightened. "But wait! They must land somewhere near Yuma and there's a military post there. Suppose I get in touch with the post by telephone?"

"But how would that solve it?" Carmoros demanded.

Tony caught his arm eagerly.

"Don't you see? You and your men lay in wait, concealed; there you have all the evidence you need. Let the plane get off. As soon as it's gone, you arrest the Mexicans. The Americans and Chinks can be picked up when they land!"

"Por Dios!"

Carmoros shook his head admiringly.

"You should be a police officer, *amigo*. You must call Yuma at once."

There was a telephone in the shack. Tony's brow wrinkled as he sat waiting for the call to be put through.

"There's just one faulty spot in the plan," he hesitated. "We're not sure just where they'll land."

"There is a radius of only about ten square miles in which it would be reasonable for them to land," Carmoros said, his eyes on a map on the wall. "Cannot the whole area be patrolled?"

"It's the only thing," Tony agreed. "But difficult. It will cover the situation, but it does leave the possibility that one or two of them may escape."

In twenty minutes the officer of the day at the Yuma post had reached the phone. Ten minutes afterward, arrangements had been made. The Army was as anxious for the capture as had been the commander of the Rurales. They agreed to patrol the entire area as intensively as possible, but Tony was still dubious.

The thing was based too much upon speculation. Suppose for any reason the smugglers should not land in that area? The whole plan would go for naught.

"We could arrest them when they returned," Carmoros suggested. "Of course, we would have to hold them for extradition and the charges against them would not be so black as if they were caught with the goods, but..."

"It's the only way," agreed Tony, shaking his head. "But decidedly unsatisfactory."

He moved to the door.

"I'm going back now," he said, watching the streaks of dawn in the east give way before the rose of advancing day. "Suppose you attach one of your men to me? Then, if my plans change, or something new comes up, I can get the message back to you."

"You are thorough, *mi' compadre*," Carmoros smiled. "It shall be done."

CHAPTER VI
Into the Cave of the Unknown

TONY Wheeler and Tallido, a keen-eyed, hawk-visaged young trooper of Carmoros' command, traveled leisurely along the road back; and consequently, it was mid-afternoon before they reached the shack. As they passed the spur, they discerned no sign of life in the cave.

Tony whistled when he drew up before the door, but there was no answer. He saw Alice's horse tied to a tree on the slope behind and forced the lock. Tallido followed him inside.

There was a premonition in his mind even before his eyes had swept the room, singularly empty and lifeless. They fell upon a white slip of paper on the table, stuck there by the point of an ugly knife. Repressing outward show of the fears which suddenly descended upon him, he hurriedly tore it loose and scanned the sheet.

It was a note in English:

> "One! The remaining one when I have Time to spare for him.
> TORQUIDAS."

He passed the note to Tallido without comment. The latter, after a glance, handed it back to him wordlessly and watched Tony's eyes. They were enough. There was a space of silence.

"Where is she?" the trooper asked at last.

Tony shrugged.

"In the cave somewhere, I suppose. I don't know what they'll do with her."

"I am an officer. Cannot we enter there boldly and search for her?"

Tony smiled gratefully. "I'm afraid not," he said. "In the first place, the cave is too large; we couldn't possibly cover it all. Secondly, if they knew you were an officer, they'd know the whole thing was up. There's too many of them for us. They'd finish us without scruple and then proceed to clear out."

Tallido nodded thinkingly, and sat down on a chair, proceeding to roll a brown paper cigaret with extreme care. Tony went to the window and stared out.

Alice was gone. He had never known until that minute how much he had counted upon seeing her here when he returned. He had not had time to realize just how lonesome things would be without her. Life — the empty future, were she not there, was unthinkable.

He swore softly to himself. He loved her, loved Alice, old Cap's daughter!

It would be dark in an hour. Suddenly he swung about on his companion.

"You stay here and wait for me," he said. "I'm going to explore the cave; maybe if they don't expect me, they'll get careless. If I don't return in an hour, start back for your men and get *Capitan* Carmoros to the cave as soon as you can."

Tallido nodded gravely and lit his cigaret. Tony darted out through the door and finding the cover of the trees, made his way toward the mouth of the cavern. In his heart was desperate anguish and anger; but he steeled himself to coolness. He could not help Alice by explosions or heroics. This was a time for cold action.

There was one lone sentry in the cave mouth; but even as Tony lay in hiding regarding him, a horse which had broken away from the knot of horses on the slope twenty yards below, claimed the man's attention. He went down.

In the few seconds before his return, Tony had darted inside the mouth of the cavern. He was in darkness. Ahead of him in the gloom he could make out faintly the ghostly blot that the wings of the plane made. The roof of the cavern was only blackness, far overhead.

He tried to recall the many fissures and crazy trails inside the place, but it was difficult. He had been in many places since he and old Cap had explored this last. And two years had gone by. The interior itself had altered, largely under the hands of the smugglers.

Strangely, he reflected, as he picked his way cautiously toward the sound of voices in the dark behind the plane, he had completely forgotten about the treasure. Even the coming of the Rurales. It was only Alice that he thought of now.

He was past the plane and there was a glow of light at the end of what seemed to be a long corridor walled with jagged rock. He made for it. Suddenly a boulder overturned beneath his feet; he was at the edge of an unseen slope. The sound, as the boulder hurtled downward, was magnified many times in the enclosed space.

Some one shouted ahead of him and from behind, a man whom he had failed to see, leaped from the airplane, a wrench in his hand. It was the American mechanic. Two men came running from the direction of the fire. He was trapped!

He felt for his pistol and crouched nearer to the edge of the path. Suddenly he felt it slide out from under him and he went tumbling downward with a mass of soft earth. A feeling of panic came over him with the knowledge that he might be buried alive in this black place.

But he did not cry out; instinct warned him that he was at least escaping without a sound. He brought up suddenly on a level flooring of rock. Beside him was the boulder he had disturbed a minute before.

Thirty feet above him, he heard the amazed voices of his pursuers. Well, at least he had escaped them!

He got to his feet and looked around. The place was not so completely dark as it might have been, he thought; and then became aware of a glow of light pervading the cell of jagged rock in which he found himself, issuing from behind a heavy blanket that seemed to screen a chamber on the same level.

He moved toward it carefully. Voices

came from within. He started at the sound of Torquidas' heavy laugh.

"Tonight, Senor Macey, you will take her back with you in the great bird. Drop her off with the Chinese; they will take care of her . . . The other—so soon as I find out where he is in hiding——"

Tony heard no more, but there was a sudden laugh and then the clink of glasses. So they were sending Alice back across the border with the Chinamen! His jaws tightened.

That was enough. He knew all he needed. He glanced around him, his eyes becoming slowly accustomed to the darkness, for a place of exit. Certainly Torquidas did not climb that soft slope each time he came to this cellar.

He was staring at the rock wall opposite the opening when he became aware that something new had attracted his eye. He crossed and pulled loose a piece of soft rock through which there ran a light white vein. As he stood staring at it, it was with difficulty that he repressed a violent exclamation.

But in the next instant, he was recalled to himself and he shoved the rock hastily into his pocket. The men inside the chamber were moving. He dove into the darkness beyond it and waited.

The candles were extinguished. Carridas emerged from behind the blanket, carrying an electric torch. Tony held his breath, but instead of passing him, they turned to the left. Behind Carridas came the *alcaide;* then the two Chinamen and a Mexican.

Tony followed quietly. The tunnel through which they found passage wound tortuously to left and right; but presently, the light of a small outdoor fire became visible ahead of them. Tony waited until the conspirators had passed safely outside. Then he crept cautiously forward.

The mouth of this exit was below and west of the main cave mouth. With a flash of recollection, Tony remembered Cap's having one day discovered it. Only it had been improved upon since then.

Torquidas and his men were mounting; they had come out just above where the horses were picketed. They rode away, their heavy laughter floating back on the light breeze; and a minute after, Tony made a dive from his concealment and reached the wooded portion of the slope. The sentry sat rigidly and calmly by the entrance.

He had been gone almost an hour and when Tony reached the shack again, he found Tallido at the door. The latter listened without comment while he outlined what he had discovered.

"Go back to Carmoros," Tony said, "and tell him to carry out the plans we made. Only I want him to get the military post on the wire and tell them there will be a light on the plane. We can't take a chance now on its being missed."

"A light?" Tallido echoed. "But how a light, *senor?*"

"I'll make the light!" Tony exclaimed. "If *she's* there, I'll be there too. Now get going and ride fast!"

CHAPTER VII

Excitement in the Clouds

Tony had not considered how he was to get into the airplane. He simply knew that he would get there, in some way. He crept up to the cave through the dark that night, and while the crowd stood clustered in front about the two fires, worked his way unseen into the cavern.

The plane stood just inside the mouth. Tony moved forward along the uneven wall, unable to see very clearly and afraid that the big monster might be already occupied. The Chinamen who were to be transported that night he had seen in front; but he knew little about aircraft and suspected that some one might be already inside. He knew himself to be outlined against the fires outside.

He slid under the massive wings and came up in the rear. His eyes began to

get accustomed to the dimness of the interior. As he arose slowly to his full height, just under the rear of the wide body, he ducked at a swift intake of breath over his head.

There was a startled cry which fortunately was not loud enough to be heard outside. The guard's seat which he had forgotten, in the rear of the plane, was occupied.

Thinking rapidly, Tony realized that since there was an enemy on the ground, escape would be useless. Even if he got away, he had lost his chance of ever getting into the plane. They must come to grips before he was discovered. He sprang erect just as a heavy club swung past his ear. His attacker was leaning out of the small seat.

His hands reached up and found the other's throat. With a jerk, the latter came out of his seat and they both dropped to the floor. Tony tightened his grasp; the man tried to cry out without making more than a little, inarticulate sound.

Tony felt his opponent's hands fumbling at his waist, but he dared not let go his grip on the throat. He sensed that his pistol was being withdrawn. In another minute he would be lost.

He gave a sudden twist and they rolled sidewise. The Mexican spluttered in a series of half-groans as Tony's hands left his throat and wrenched the pistol with one movement from his fingers. Tony brought up the heavy butt and it came down once. It was enough.

His man rolled over on his side, unconscious from the blow. Tony looked up apprehensively. Those outside were moving toward the machine. The two Chinamen who accompanied Torquidas were marshalling their countrymen in a little file.

Sticking his pistol into its holster, Tony tumbled his senseless antagonist on to his face and ripped the leather jacket from his shoulders. The cap with its earlaps and goggles followed. Just as Macey, the flyer, and his companion reached the cockpit, Tony pushed his man into the dark and leapt into the little seat in the rear.

The goggles hid his face completely. He felt for his big flashlight and drew the pistol half out from its holster. Discovery was unlikely, but possible.

He watched Carridas step up to the plane with a limp bundle in his arms. It was Alice Martell. His teeth ground together as he saw her dumped unceremoniously into the fore part of the airplane fuselage, bound carefully hand and foot. Carridas laughed and turned away to his chief.

The plane was pushed forward slowly and drew out into the circle of firelight. A ladder was thrown against the side and the Chinamen mounted. One of their two leaders motioned toward the bound girl and said something in his own tongue. The first of the Chinese to enter the plane replied with a meaning laugh.

Tony waited. So far he was safe. The last of the Chinamen entered the hold and the aviator got into his seat. Torquidas gave a shout and sprang to the side. He glanced casually into the little rear seat and appeared satisfied when Tony, behind his goggles, nodded shortly.

"Now for Señor Wheeler!" he cried in Spanish, to the flyer, just as the propellers whirled. Tony grinned.

"Not yet—quite," he muttered to himself.

The ship moved forward down the gradual slope, the propellors churning the air and the big motors whirring loudly. Tony glanced at the rapidly moving scenery, wondering if Carmoros were lying in wait behind the bushes gliding past.

He experienced a strange empty sensation in the pit of his stomach as the plane took the air. And he felt very much alone, very much lost in endless black space, there at the tail end of the monster. Instinctively he thought of Rover. Yes, the ground was his place. Only one thing could have brought him here. He thought of the bound girl in

the hold and his jaws tightened sharply.

Borne upward on the crest of the breeze, he thought he distinguished a yell. Rapidly moving figures darted about the dots of firelight far below; from out of the dark came the red flashes of firearms.

Carmoros had attended to his job!

The plane was over the water; below it, the gulf gleamed like a black sheet under the first pallid rays of the moon, which seemed to be getting nearer each minute. Tony conquered the sickish sensation that their dizzy height gave him, only by remembering his responsibilities.

The Chinamen were gibbering excitedly. He leaned forward.

Ahead were the lights dotting the coast of Sonora. The plane swung about in a wide arc and headed directly north. The Colorado River was like a thin band below them where it emptied into the gulf. In ten minutes sight of the gulf had been left far behind.

The river twisted its mysterious way off to their left. For half an hour longer, the big motors purring smoothly with never a sputter, they continued to fly north over the land, until far ahead of them, there gleamed a light.

Tony strained his eyes to pierce the swimming dark. Another light appeared and yet another. It was the town of Yuma!

He leaned forward. Somewhere ahead the cavalry was in waiting. Where did Macey intend to land? They swept forward without a pause until the lights of the town were directly under them and then continued in a northeasterly direction.

The post was below.

It was time for action. The aviator showed no sign of looking for a landing place. He had evidently a map of the ground in mind.

Tony leaned far over the edge of the plane and flashed on his big electric lamp. It seemed woefully small and insignificant at this height; he wondered dubiously if it could be seen. Then, from the ground below, there winked first one small light and then another.

They continued, while he stared unbelievably, until he knew they were an answer. A whole string of them came, in a long row. The troopers were waiting.

There came an excited cry from the cabin of the ship. Tony looked up just in time to see three or four of the Chinamen, pointing excitedly at him. One scrambled toward the cockpit and struck the mechanic on the shoulder.

The latter spoke to the driver; the plane zig-zagged dizzily upward. They waved their hands at him. Tony kept his torch lit. There was a hasty conversation — he could hear their excited voices but not the words—during which time the plane continued its upward flight; and then the mechanic unstrapped himself from his place and started for the rear.

Tony's jaws came together. He was discovered!

He drew his pistol and fired a warning shot. The mechanic ducked and in the next instant, from the dark, there came a flash and a single report. The ball whistled harmlessly by Tony's head. The Chinamen were howling.

Tony fired again and when the mechanic sprang to his feet to return the shot, he slumped forward and dropped behind the shelter of his seat. But the pistol was still in his fingers. His enemy, his face lighted, darted for the rear through the hold.

Just as he reached the edge of the cabin moulding, Tony jerked up and his pistol came up at the same time. It caught the startled American in the pit of his stomach. His hands were shoved up into the air without a command. Tony sat up.

"Get in here!" he commanded, and relieved the other of his pistol as he climbed from his seat.

The plane was on a dangerous angle, careening upward, but the mechanic obeyed. Tony steadied himself, conquering his revulsion at the increasing

height, and faced the crowd in the small cabin, two pistols wavering over them. The Chinamen crowded fearfully into a little huddled group. He passed quickly through them to where Alice Martell lay bound.

CHAPTER VIII
Happy Landings

"It's I, Alice—Tony," he said, pushing back his goggles.

She gave a grateful little cry. In another minute her bonds were cut and he had shoved the extra pistol into her hands.

"Cover the Chinks and that bird in the rear," he shouted into her ear. "Shoot on suspicion. I'll take care of the pilot."

He clambered out of the hold and across the curving surface of the body that divided it from the pilot's seat. Below him, the ground was a dizzy succession of whirling lights. He dared not look again. His sight became blurred and his ears were ringing with the tremendous height.

The plane was on a deadly slant. His fingers slipped on the polished surface of the body. He grasped for the edge of the pilot's seat as the latter turned, his teeth snarling between parted lips. There was a short, breathless interval—a snarl of rage and Tony felt a heavy piece of metal come down across his fingers.

The flyer cursed at him as he slipped backward, grasping frantically for a hold. Below, the ground seemed worlds away. He gripped again for the seat and the pilot smashed savagely at his numbed fingers. Tony's knee came up and he hooked his foot inside the mechanic's seat.

In the next instant, while the atmosphere became a blur and his breath stopped, he let go and gave a lunge forward, throwing body and legs toward the cockpit. He made it.

Macey struck at him just as he brought his pistol up. He ducked and placed the muzzle of the gun under the latter's nose.

"You don't have to come down," he yelled, "and I won't shoot, but remember that I can stay here with you until your petrol runs out and our positions won't change."

The wrench dropped from the flyer's fingers to the floor of the cockpit. He shrugged.

"I'll come down," he said. "Where?"

Tony pointed toward the last of the series of lanterns on the ground beneath them. He watched narrowly as his man reached for the controls and their upward course ended. They circled downward in wide, graceful arcs, until the ground was only a few hundred feet below.

Macey took one last look at him and when he saw that Tony had not relaxed his vigilance, he shrugged again, shut off his power, and brought the plane with scarcely a jolt, to earth. Tony breathed; he realized that it was for the first time in many minutes.

A trooper came spurring up out of the dark—another! A sabre flashed among the zig-zagging lanterns. As the bewildered and frantic Chinamen made a sudden burst for liberty, they found themselves surrounded by a troop of cavalry. An officer spurred up to the cockpit.

"Wheeler?" he demanded.

Tony nodded. Alice was climbing into the seat beside him.

"They're all here, captain," he cried. "Both the crew and the loot. And the Rurales have the Mexican criminals."

"Beautiful work," the officer said, smiling. "Complete roundups are rare. But I wouldn't have changed places with you in that plane for a brigadier's commission!"

Tony shook his head. He had found Alice Martell in his arms and knew that he was holding her. It was because there was so very little room in the cock-

pit, he assured himself. But he glanced toward her when he replied:

"Stick to your branch of the service, captain; take my advice, horses are best. Only one thing in the world could have brought me up in the air!"

Alice's hand tightened upon his.

"Do we go back to the shack tomorrow?" she whispered into his ear.

He hesitated. "Together?" he demanded.

"If—if you say so—Tony," she murmured, averting her flushed, happy face from his eyes. But her eyes were starry, even in the dark. He drew her closer to him.

"I say so," he said gently. "Only —Alice, we won't have to look for the old smugglers' treasure. I've discovered the real secret of the cave." He drew from his pocket the piece of rock he had knocked from the wall of the sub-cavern that afternoon and its white vein flashed in the light from the dash. "A heavy vein of pure silver!"

She sighed and shook her head. "Then —we're rich?" she stammered.

Tony nodded. "It means a lot—to both of us," he agreed. "Only, Alice, going back there with you — means more."

"Like—like going home," she assented in a happy whisper.

Mongrels with Thoroughbred Hearts

THE long snake-like whip sang out over the furry backs of twenty panting huskies.

"Mush," bawled Leonard Seppalla, king of dog-team drivers.

Then over the frozen Arctic snows, commenced one of the severest tests of endurance from man and dog ever blazed across the pages of Northland history. Literally hundreds of hopeful souls with disease stricken lives stalking them, were praying that the great Northerner would get through. Death or healthy recovery of the entire community of Nome depended on the successful termination of the great "mush." It was the plunge of men and dogs into the dazzling maze of snow and storm with anti-toxin serum for the stricken Alaskans.

Many old trappers and pioneers of the gold days wagged their heads in pessimistic attitude. "No man," they said, "could overcome the obstacles of that journey, while the country was in the steel-like grip of winter." Natives along the trail barred their doors against the boom of a great storm, assuring themselves that no man could pass in that night of swirling shrieks of the North gods.

Could the Northland people have peered into the roaring tossing sea of snow that bellowed down into the black void that night they would have been rewarded with a strange sight indeed—that of a long gray shadow of twenty stout-hearted dogs, a sledge and a lumping shadow over it, plunging and grunting through the gale that threatened their lives each inch of the way.

That "no man could overcome that storm" was true, no man did, but man's best friend, a dog, and a cur dog at that, *did*, while the driver, blinded by stinging sleet and cutting gale, hung to his sledge, his back to the howling storm, letting his lead dogs, "Scotty" and "Togo" pull the team to struggling safety and final victory.

The lead dogs were mongrel curs, and, declares one of the most famous Arctic explorers, most lead dogs are, because they have a blind courage coupled with a blind devotion which, unknown to finer dog minds, carry their mates and loved drivers through perilous tortures to golden victory.

Son of the North

(A Complete Novelet)

By Evan Merritt Post

Arctic—"Moose" Cardigan—man, meets Brayson—killer

"YOU coward!" cried the girl vehemently, "you spineless coward!"

The big, smooth-shaven owner of the trading-cabin regarded her mockingly with his jet-black, domineering eyes, and then replied, with the smirking smile habitual with him:

"You know my rules. Well, I ain't breakin' 'em—not even for a skirt! An' a damn pretty skirt at that. Unless, that is...." His eyes completed the insult to her womanhood.

May Clintock met his insolent gaze squarely, spiritedly, as she had met the other crises of her life up there in that land, lying in the shadow of the Arctic Circle. Spirit and nerve and a dash of the I-dare-you-to, in her commanding blue eyes. That was May Clintock.

Just now those eyes of hers held a dangerous glint.

"Don't think for a minute, Brayson," she retorted, "that I'm asking this for *myself!* I'd die, a thousand times, before I'd ask *you* for anything! I've come on Dad's account. He helped you once last fall. Now he's down with scurvy, and he'll likely die unless he gets the right sort of food quick. You have that food, Brayson. You can save his life!"

"Big" Brayson laughed. It was a sort of hollow, mocking laugh in which there was not the slightest trace of mirth. It was characteristic of this big-shouldered man from the "outside" that he laughed often, but that one always caught the impression of something ugly, something of a sneer, lurking behind those laughs.

"Show your dust," he said flatly, "then maybe I'll talk. I've told you before. I'm not trusting."

"Gold!" she flung back passionately, "gold! You live and dream it! It's the only creed you've got! You—you beast! I've told you you took the last Dad had for those potatoes last week!"

"Sure," returned the big man, leaning back against the edge of the rough-made table; "sure. And what do you think I came up into this damned North of yours for — the love of it?" He laughed, "You can bet your life that when I've made my pile, I'll be gittin' out, to a *white* man's country—quick!"

Apparently the girl who stood before him in his cabin was beyond speech now. She seemed to tremble with a welling rage, a contempt for this man that was so all-consuming that no words could frame it adequately. Beneath the tan of wind and sun, her face had gone white.

"I seen a chance to make my stake here in this camp," the man went on tauntingly, "and I stocked up on grub before the snow flew. That took brains. Now those who want it can pay or——"

"They *trusted* you!" cried the girl; "that's what they did — *trusted* you! They knew you had brought in enough supplies to keep them supplied all winter. That's why nobody else laid by. They believed in you — thought you'd deal square with them! The young blood gone on to new fields. Only old men and women left here for the winter. That's why you stayed here! They were the oldest of the gold-seekers. Old men and women! And you knew you could bleed them! Bah! You *coward.*"

Again Brayson laughed that hollow laugh of his, and a self-satisfied expression came into his face.

"You're jealous," he said. "That's all. Jealous because I've got what I come up here for. You've got to hand it to me——"

"Hand it to you?" echoed May Clintock bitterly, "HAND it to you!" The words seemed to choke her utterance. In that moment, her eyes hurling defiance at him, she was glorious. Standing there before the sheet-iron stove, a little crouched forward, her breast heaving, she was the very embodiment of all that is big and fine and splendid up there in that North. She seemed to emanate the true spirit of the land—the love of fair play, of giving a man a chance when he is down. She was a beautiful, living part of the Alaska she loved.

"Yes, Brayson," she ended grimly, and she thrilled at the thought, some day some one *will* hand it to you—as you deserve, man fashion! Then may your God take pity on you!"

Suddenly she wheeled and went toward the door. There, her hand upon the wooden latch, she turned once more to face the man who still stood leaning back against the edge of the table, smiling. And in her blue eyes was there untold contempt for this man from The States who had come up into her land to bleed it, and then go on his way.

"The time will come," she said slowly, evenly, laying a peculiar stress on each word, "when you'll meet up with some man like Moose Cardigan. And I sort of hate to think of what he would do to you, because there's one thing he can't stand and you're that thing, Brayson — *you,* and the others of your stripe!"

"I'd like to meet him," smiled Brayson.

"You will," came the reply; "sooner or later. And when you do, you'll have the pleasure of meeting a man who, compared with you. Brayson is a *god!*"

And the door swung shut upon this daughter of the snows.

CHAPTER II
A Man Among Men

He stopped. And the jingling of the bells on the dogs died out on the cold, crisp air, as they dropped in the snow for a brief rest before taking up the trail again. Fine-looking dogs they were.

The man chuckled softly. He was proud of those dogs; proud of what they could do in a pinch; proud of what

they stood for. He leaned upon one of the handle-bars of the sled now and regarded his team.

"Been making great time today, and no mistake there, you huskies. Forty miles over an unbroken trail, and loaded heavy. Fine! Fine work, lads. And with the old mercury playing tag around the sixty-below mark, at that! The best team in Alaska. What I've always claimed. Now I've proved it! And unless we run on to hard luck, we'll add another five to that before we pitch camp."

Again he chuckled boyishly, stressing the splendid muscles of his well-knit body, sensing the hardness and the fitness of them. He left the handle-bars and went forward, giving close attention to the wants of each dog. Here and there was a dog who lifted a foot for the attention that it knew this big strapping son of the north would give it.

Sometimes it was merely a ball of hard snow that had worked in between the pads that was giving trouble. Again it was a bleeding foot. To all of these little wants Cardigan paid that close attention that characterizes the best of mushers. And always he accompanied his ministrations with a kindly, soft-spoken word of encouragement that men who don't know what they are talking about call fool sentimentality, and rot; but which, with Moose Cardigan, exemplified the creed that made him what he was.

"And maybe they won't be glad to see us pull in tomorrow," he chuckled. "Maybe they won't lads! They're hard hit sure enough. You can bet your ornery, worthless hides on that. Ned Simpson didn't lie. He was too far gone by the time he pulled into Eagle to speak much, but it's a cinch, lads, that something's gone wrong up there in the hills—*way* wrong!"

He straightened up to his full height after adjusting a moccasin to the right fore foot of the lead dog, and allowed his keen, piercing gaze to wander up the river-trail that lay ahead. "Going to keep getting worse every mile," he soliloquized contemplatingly.

It indeed looked so. But he was used to difficult trails, this Cardigan. He even exulted in them; exulted in the knowledge that he and those fine dogs of his could tackle anything under the Northern Lights and win through. And now he laughed, and whistled a tune he remembered from boyhood days.

"*Mush* you lads!" he sang out, and the heavy, grub-laden sledge quivered and then lurched ahead. And Moose Cardigan honestly believed in that moment that he was the happiest man in all that north country.

For his was the glory of a come-back. A real come-back. And he was rightly proud of it. Five years ago he had come up into that North a weakling. Soft foods, irregular hours, and city life had undermined his life. While now, for five years since he had answered the call of the North, God's clean, invigorating air, the work of men, and the rough food of the trail had got in their work. The North had taken him in hand. It had taken him a weakling; it had made of him a man. Wherefore was he happy and proud; and wherefore did he love that land that had made him. He was a man with big heart and fists to match. And he knew how to use them both.

And it was because of these things that men along the Yukon there swore by him and some women called him a —god.

NO sooner had the door closed upon the departing form of May Clintock than an odd expression came over Brayson's face. For he had lied to her. He *had* heard that name Moose Cardigan. And he had heard — what was perhaps more significant—that the man hailed from a certain town back in New Hampshire by the name of Manchester.

Now, alone in his cabin, he became very thoughtful. The girl's words had awakened memories. Of course, he reasoned, it might be a mere coincidence.

After all, Manchester was a pretty sizeable place. There might have been a Cardigan there whom he had not known —another Cardigan. But he had spoken some at one time of hitting up into Alaska and getting in on the rush. Perhaps....

Suddenly his thoughts were broken in upon by the entrance of two men. They appeared in a state of great excitement.

"Listen, Brayson," the one in the red-and-green checked mackinaw exclaimed between breaths, "there's goin' to be hell to pay here in a little while. Slim and I just got it straight that one of that Simpson bunch what made a break fer Eagle awhile back, won through."

"He *did!*"

"Yep. Leastwise that's what this fellow told me—the other two what were with him died on th' way out, but this one...."

"Who told you this?" demanded Brayson quickly.

"An Indian. A breed, I guess," was the reply.

"When did he come in?"

"He didn't come into camp. We was out lookin' around fer game about two miles north of here, and he come by ——"

"Mushed from Eagle?" put in Brayson, his apprehension deep written in the lines of his face.

"He wouldn't say."

"What was he doin'?"

"Said he was headin' in back fer th' hills. Queer sort. Wouldn't talk much. But said he hed a hunch they was game yardin' back in there somewheres. And that's all I know. Whether he come from Eagle himself, or whether the news was passed on to him by another of his damn tribe, I don't know."

"Why in the devil didn't you find out!" exclaimed the big man.

The man who had not yet spoken now put in a word.

"Bill done th' best he could. That Injun just wouldn't say. And we hurried right here so's to let you know soon's possible."

A wave of scarce suppressed excitement seemed to have taken possession of Brayson. For a few minutes he passed back and forth, from one end of the room to the other. His dark eyes were narrowed, and his hands were thrust deep into the side pockets of his heavy gray mackinaw. Suddenly he stopped short before his two waiting confederates.

"Get your packs ready!" he commanded.

"Where we goin'?" asked the smaller of the two men who had just recently entered, the man called Bill.

"Where do you suppose!" said Brayson.

"That's what I'm askin'."

"To watch the Eagle trail, of course," came the big man's reply. "Where else do you think I'd be sendin' you—after what you've just told me?"

"Well, don't get sore about it," growled Bill; "you can't blame me fer wantin' to know."

"Never mind that kind of talk, Hendle!" snapped Brayson; "don't ferget that we're all at sea in the same boat—and that *I'm* doin' the steerin'."

"Yes, and you'll have us all on the rocks in damn short order too, if you don't quit overplayin' your hand," returned Bill Hendle, his small, pale, watery eyes meeting those of his boss.

"Gettin' yellow, are you?" demanded Brayson.

A quick flush spread over Hendle's face at this.

"No, I ain't gettin' yellow," he came back; "but I'm seein' things what you ain't. Seein' clearer. That's all...."

"Are you," demanded the big man heatedly, "goin' to follow out my orders, or not. Speak up!"

"Yes. I'm in too deep now to pull out alone. Yes. What are they?"

"And you too, Slim?" he addressed the other man who had stood silently beside the stove, looking on.

"Yes. I'm with Bill," came the response.

"All right. I want you two to go

out and stand watch over the Eagle trail. You kin spell each other sleepin'. Because if they's anything to this what you just got hold of, why they'll be some one mushin' in here damn soon. He'll bring food and trouble. And — well, you're to see that no one mushin' that Eagle trail ever reaches camp!"

"You mean—killin'?" It was Bill who asked.

"I mean," replied Brayson, "that this somebody just sort of dies on the trail. Call it whatever you like. And see that you make a good job of it, Bill, 'cause if you don't, why news of that other accidental shootin' of yours might leak out where it won't do you much good. Understand?"

CHAPTER III
Two-fisted Justice

The sun rose slowly, as if reluctant to show itself, above the cold, snow-swept rim of the world.

Cardigan chuckled. "You're late, old boy," he said; "getting up at half-past-ten! And here I've been burning daylight for a good four hours." And once more he chuckled boyishly, his bright blue eyes sparkling. His parka framed his face. "Now if I was a——"

The menacing whine of a bullet sang in his ears, followed, in a split-second, by the crash of a rifle from somewhere a little up ahead and to the right. Cardigan's pulse leaped. He was riding the runners of the sledge now.

"Whoa!" he cried—"down, you dogs! *Down!*"

Another bullet kicked up a puff of dry snow at his feet, and Moose Cardigan threw himself flat in the snow alongside the halted sled. In this way he was, for the moment, sheltered from his unseen enemies by the sled load. More shots were coming from up ahead. Cardigan, without exposing his body, reached up and freed his rifle from the throngs that held it to the side of the sled.

He leveled it over the top of the tarpaulin-covered supplies and sought to gain a sight of the persons who were firing at him. For he knew by the sound of the shots that there was more than one rifle at work. Two, at least. Maybe more.

There! That flash of brown in that bunch of alders up ahead! He had seen. His rifle roared. Then he held his fire. A miss or hit, he could not tell. A silence had fallen up ahead. From seconds this silence lengthened into minutes. Cardigan began to fear that this cessation from firing presaged a new move on the part of his attackers. What? He tried to figure it out.

Then, in the next instant, he knew! A shot broke out from *behind* him, and the lead hit the loaded sled with a thud, not more than a foot from Cardigan's head. Springing to his feet, he leaped for the shelter of the other side of the sled. Two more shots in quick succession greeted this move on his part. Misses, both. But by a matter of inches only.

He was now once more sheltered by the load on the sled. A sudden hot, burning indignation swept through his veins.

"The damned sneaks!" he muttered; "I wonder what their game is?"

Up to this point he had given no thought as to why he was being attacked. Sufficient that he was. The why's and wherefore's could wait.

Another report from the spruce growth; and an accompanying yelp from a stricken dog. Cardigan could see the animal that had been hit from where he lay. He saw the dog half-rise to its feet, stagger there a moment, then drop motionless to the snow between its fellows. And Moose Cardigan knew that it was dead.

"God!" he groaned, "they got Zero! By God!—the——." It was a fitting word — the one he used. One that

rarely passed the lips of this big-hearted musher of the North.

His blood boiled. He sprang to his feet, forgetful now of his own peril. And, his rifle gripped in his big hands before him, he sprang over the sled toward the thicket from which the shot had come. It was the moose in him that showed now.

"You yellow-bellied curs!" he shouted; "now you *will* pay!"

It was a reckless act. But gloriously reckless. It was the blazing forth of the spirit of his forbears—the spirit that had conquered wildernesses.

He scarcely heard the reports of the rifles before him, and the whistling of lead close by. He had covered perhaps half the distance to the thicket when he felt his left arm torn by hot lead, a bad flesh wound.

In another moment, Cardigan saw the forms of two men fleeing before him as though the devil himself were after them.

He overtook them; towered over them.

"Drop those guns!" he ordered the fear-shaken men. "And now get ready for the worst beating you ever got in your lives. Yes, the both of you!"

He stuck his own rifle, butt down, in the snow beside him, and then stepped forward to meet them. His eyes were the color of steel — a hard, tempered steel.

"When I'm dealing with men," he said tensely, "I pay them the compliment of taking them one at a time. But when I'm dealing with *things* like you, I take them as they come. And the more the merrier! Now put up those filthy hands of yours! Both of you! I'm not asking questions. I'll ask them —afterward! Just now I'm going to make you wish you'd never heard the name Alaska!"

And, even though he was wounded, and by the very law of things up against big odds, he pitched into them, man-like, in the age-old manner of men who never know when they're licked.

CHAPTER IV
Grim Destiny

May Clintock raised her head suddenly in an attitude of acute listening. Beside her, the sick man on the cot stirred a little, but only a very little, as he noted the quick change in his daughter's bearing. He was a sick old man.

"What—is—it—May?" The words came feebly, scarce audible, from his emaciated lips.

But the girl had sprung to her feet. To the man in the bunk it seemed that at that moment her eyes glistened like stars, stars that have been long obscured by clouds.

"Don't—don't you hear those bells, Dad?" Her voice was suddenly tremulous, hopeful beyond words. "And those shouts?" she finished, "someone's just mushed in!"

She took a quick step toward the window overlooking the one street of the camp, on either side of which fronted rudely-built log cabins, from some of which rose smoke, from others, none. Death had taken its toll at that isolated camp.

And as she looked, a cry broke from her lips, a joyous little cry. She wheeled and faced her sick father, whose eyes, so listless of late, had now taken on a new, a more hopeful look.

"It's — guess, Dad! Guess who it is!"

The man smiled faintly as he noted the beautiful flow of color into his daughter's cheeks. He knew. He was an understanding, sympathetic man—this Frank Clintock.

"Sure, and it's Moose," he said.

There was something more than mere eagerness in the girl's face now—something deeper and more lovely than that. "Yes — it's *Moose Cardigan,*" she breathed.

In a twinkling, she had thrown on her mackinaw, and was out in the street. People were running out of their cabins, people in whom the sight of this big musher had given rise to a feeling of security and hope they had not experienced for months.

He was already hemmed in by a little group of eager men and women, and as May approached she heard a hearty, cheering laugh peal out from the midst of that small group. No need to guess from whom it came! It was the laugh of a big man who was loved because he did laugh at those trying times when a laugh was most needed.

"Here!" she heard one of the men near him protest, "take back some of this grub you've given me, you young fool! You're robbin' yerself!"

"I'm keeping enough," smiled Cardigan.

"No, you're not!" the first speaker persisted, "and you know it. Here ——"

"Say," came the reply, "whose food *is* this, anyway; That's what——"

"Moose!" It was as much the way that one word was uttered, as the word itself, that caused all eyes to be turned upon the girl who had worked her way into the circle.

"May! Well, this *is* a sure enough surprise! How does it happen *you're* here? The last I heard was that you were taking the next boat for the "outside!"

A more pronounced color flooded into the girl's cheeks. "Dad—that is—he, he changed his mind at the last minute."

Whereat one of the old bearded miners to her right chuckled, knowingly. "Unless I'm one mighty ornery poor guesser, Moose, her Dad wa'n't th' *only* one to change his mind!"

The proportioning of food went on, and frequently Moose Cardigan smiled and laughed. But a change was coming over May Clintock. She sensed something sinister in the situation. And as the minutes passed, this feeling grew to be almost a conviction. Beneath the laughter of the big musher, she perceived a certain false note. He was too cheery. He was overdoing it a little. Why?

Under that smile of his, her woman's intuition detected a something grim, a something almost terrible. And it frightened her — because she sensed rather than knew that this something was there. Why should he dissemble so? The thought flashed through her brain.

After a few moments, the food all evenly given out, Moose broke away from the other people and took May Clintock by the arm.

"Gee, May," he exclaimed, smiling, "but it's great to see you! And how's your father?"

"Father is sick," she replied, and suddenly, half way up the street to the cabin, she stopped and faced him. "Moose, look at me!" she commanded.

He chuckled.

"Now what?" he queried.

Her eyes clashed with his.

"Moose, tell me! Tell me what's wrong!"

"Nothing's wrong, May," he assured her.

"Yes, there is, Moose! You're lying to me! I can see through that smile of yours. Something *is* wrong! You — you're smiling because God made you that way, and because nothing can kill that smile — that lovable boy in you. But inside, you're not—smiling, Moose. I know. I can see. You fooled those people back there. But not me. Inside you, you're grim, and — and terrible!"

"Why, May, you poor kid," he said; "what's got on your nerves ——"

"The something that you're keeping from me, Moose," she replied; "because I know . . ."

Suddenly she broke off, her eyes riveted upon the left sleeve of his parka. And as her glance flashed up to meet his the second following, the man knew that she knew.

"Moose — that, that blood on your

sleeve!" she said tensely; "and that rent there in the cloth! Moose, you've been shot at — wounded — and you, you're trying to keep it from me!"

He made a hopeless little gesture with his big, mittened hands, and his eyes left hers to look off toward the deep, black forest of spruce that frowned down upon that little placer settlement from all sides. Night was setting in fast.

"I'm sorry," he said, "that you've found out. I did my best to keep it from you."

"And why?" she demanded quickly, gripping the sleeve of his parka and searching his eyes. "Why did you try to keep it from me?"

He was silent for just a moment. Then he said simply:

"Because I love you, girl. That's why. And—and there are things that you shouldn't know. Something I'd hate to have you know."

"What?" Her voice was low, but firm.

He hesitated. His eyes again left hers. The smile waned. Some mighty force within him, and over which he had no control, seemed to be wrenching him. And then, suddenly, the thing that had been swelling up within him—that terrible thing which the girl's keen perception had noted—burst out:

"May," he spoke, "I tried to keep it from you because I'm afraid of myself. Terribly afraid of myself."

"Why?" At that moment she seemed somehow to have changed. The girl in her—the spirit of her twenty-one years—had suddenly come to full womanhood. Her eyes were tender, yet firm as rock. She looked like a woman who would go through hell for a man.

"Because, May," he said grimly, meeting her eyes, "I feel for the first time in my life like killing a man. I am afraid I *am* going to kill a man."

He had believed that this knowledge would be a great shock to the girl, and it was. But only by the whiteness of her face was this betrayed. She made no move; made no outcry. Just looked him in the eye for a long moment, and then said low:

"Brayson."

"Yes."

"You have learned of how he has treated these people in here?" It was more a statement of fact, than a question.

"Yes. It was two of his men who attacked me out there. I beat the truth out of them. They told me everything."

"And it is because of that ——"

"Partly," he interrupted her, nodding his head slowly, and his mouth was formed into a grim, straight line. The smile, that was so much a part of him, was gone now.

"Then there is something else? Something beside this that makes you feel as you do toward him?" She paused; waited for him to speak.

"Yes," he said slowly, grimly, "there is something else." And the girl, watching him closely, felt a conviction that in the man's past life there had been tragedy, and that Brayson had figured in that tragedy.

"Some day," she said simply, "maybe I'll tell you about it. Then you'll understand. I'm sorry that I hate this Brayson the way I do, because usually I like people and I like to help them. But it's what he's done. Yes, I'm sorry. But I feel that way, and I can't help it. And so," he ended simply, "I guess I'm going to kill him."

The very calmness with which he said it frightened her; filled her with a dread of what the future held in store.

CHAPTER V
The Clutch of Circumstance

With his revolver loaded and ready and lying in front of him, Brayson sat and waited, facing the door. Waited for what he knew was coming. In the

yellow glow from the overhead lamp his face showed pallid, drawn by a fear which was his master. It was the face of a man who has seen a ghost, and in that ghost, his doom.

"It's *him* all right," he mumbled, "but God, how he's changed. The size of him! He'll be comin' here any minute now. But I won't give him a chance. I'll shoot him down—it'll be in self-defense. 'Cause when he comes, it'll be to kill me."

The minutes dragged by, the one after the other. A half-hour. An hour passed. A tremor passed through the man waiting at the table. Why didn't the other come? Could it be that the other man was afraid? No. That could not be it. For in his heart of hearts, Brayson knew that Moose Cardigan was afraid of no man under the sun.

Once or twice he cast a glance behind him to the door of the back room of the cabin where lay those two men, beaten within an inch of their lives, who had dragged themselves back to the cabin there under the shelter of darkness. But always his eyes would go back to the door—waiting.

Finally something seemed to break within the man. It was this waiting, this eternal waiting for the other man to come and strike. Unnerved, he got to his feet; stood listening there for a little while. Then, getting into his mackinaw, he went out into the night. A new thought crystallized in his mind.

It was very dark. There was no moon, and the stars were obscured. Also, it had grown a little warmer. A new wind was rising. Probably it was going to snow. By a circuitous route, Brayson slipped to the Clintock cabin, where he knew Cardigan was staying. Stealthily he gained a position just beside the cabin window. He looked in. And there, within ten feet of him, sat Moose Cardigan, beside the stove. And beside him, talking to him, was May.

A wave of fierce exultation swept over Brayson, courage came to him, but it was the courage born of cowardice. Slowly he raised and leveled his revolver. Only ten feet. He couldn't miss.

It was at this point that the girl inside raised her voice a little. Her words came distinctly to Brayson. Then he heard Cardigan's reply. What he heard caused him to lower his revolver. He listened closely, and, a few moments later, was speeding in the direction of his own cabin. His mind was working fast. So that was how things were working out, eh? he thought. Well, it couldn't be better for him, he reflected.

Not many minutes later he emerged again stealthily from his cabin and made toward Clintock's. In less than fifteen minutes he was back again in the shelter of his own cabin. There, warming his hands over the stove, he broke out into a loud laugh. There are times when a laugh is a hideous thing. It was so now.

"There," he reflected grimly, as with shaking hands he groped for a cigaret, "I'll never be troubled with thinkin' of *him* again!"

THE morning was well along. The world was gray, the air heavy with a feeling of impending snow. May Clintock stood at the window of her father's cabin, looking out, and her eyes were troubled. Cardigan had gone that way not long before.

For hours during the previous evening she had importuned him to go away for a few days so that he might cool off, reason it all out calmly and sanely, and then return and meet Brayson. At length he had given in. She was divinely thankful for this now, as she stood there at the window gazing the way he had gone.

But at the same time she was troubled. She could not forget that terrible look in his eyes as he had left her. A sense of foreboding struck her now. It was something that she could not shake off.

"Oh, Moose," she breathed, "if you can only get a grip on yourself in these few days...if you only *can*...for I don't want you to be a killer. It would

brand you the rest of your life. And you're too big—too much above that."

It was in the midst of this meditation that she saw something that made her start. A figure was running at breakneck speed down the street toward the cabin she was in. And she recognized that figure. It was Brayson. She felt her pulse quicken. What did this mean? Why was this man she hated now running in that excited manner toward her cabin?

She wheeled. The door burst open. Brayson, breathless, plunged in. His whole bearing was strange. Some great, overwhelming excitement seemed to have taken complete possession of him.

"Come—quick!" he gasped between breaths, "it's Cardigan—he's hurt—bad—something's happened to him—he's ——"

The girl's face had gone death-white. Before she could speak, the man went on:

"He's dyin'. Needs you—wants you——"

"Brayson," demanded the girl, her countenance the color of dead ashes, "are you lying—are you?"

"No! Believe me! I know you think it's strange that I should be doin' this, after all I've done. But I come on him out there on the trail—not a half hour back—said something about appendicitis gettin' him. His team got to fightin'—was hopeless. And what he told me about you made me see clear all at once. I have been a brute. I realize it now. But for God's sake, hurry! Don't stand there! I promised him—he needs you."

In a moment she was outside with the big man.

"How far?" she cried, and the color had not returned to her cheeks.

"Most two miles."

"Oh, get your team! And *hurry!*"

In less than two minutes he was back with his team of dogs.

"Quick!" he commanded, "we'll have to make it fast! He said there wasn't much time to lose!"

Even as he spoke, the dogs leaped ahead in the traces. The sled gathered speed and swept down the street between the two rows of cabins and in a few seconds was on the trail. May was on it. Brayson was riding the runners.

"Tell me," she demanded, turning on the sled and facing him for a moment, "just what has—has happened to him?"

"He said appendicitis. That's all I know. Begged me not to stay by him, but to hurry for you."

And now, silent, fearful, May Clintock turned and faced the trail ahead. And there were moments when her heart was like lead. Snow was beginning to fall, and the flakes struck against her hot face. The sled swerved from side to side. They were hitting a fast pace.

In her burning anxiety, the girl had failed to consider the fact that the sledge was pretty well loaded. She thought only of the man who was hurt and who needed her. Had she had time to give to details, she might also have pondered over the fact that it had taken Brayson a very short while to prepare his team to take the trail.

Camp lay far behind now. On all sides towered the spruce forest, dark and grim. The snow was coming thicker.

Suddenly May Clintock saw something that made her heart stop. A suspicion had leaped into her mind. For she had seen. There could be no mistake.

"Brayson," she said swiftly, "you've been lying to me!"

"Lyin'?" came the explosive reply from the man who crouched behind upon the runners, "what in hell makes you think I'm lyin'?"

Their eyes met.

"Because there's Cardigan's trail over there to the *right!* You've swung off it! You're not going to him!"

He leered down upon her.

"Well, what of it?" he demanded; "we're a long ways from camp now..."

With a lightning-like movement, the girl threw herself sideways off the speeding sledge. She rose quickly from the snow, broke off a short piece of dead lower limb from a jack-pine, and stood there facing him defiantly. Brayson had stopped the team and was advancing toward her.

She stood her ground, club held tight in her right hand.

"No need your takin' it *that* way," cautioned the man, stopping about four paces' distance from her, "'cause it won't do you no good. When I want a thing, I get it. And I want you——"

"Well," she said spiritedly, "here I am!"

"Drop that club, you—hussy!"

"Afraid of a girl, eh, Brayson? Afraid of a club! I always thought you were yellow! No, I won't drop this club. And just touch me, just *touch me*—if you dare!"

A laugh greeted this, and in the next instant the man had her covered with his revolver.

"Oh, you *are* yellow, Brayson!" she exclaimed.

"Well, you're comin' with me—for tonight, at least. There's that old cabin down the trail a ways. We're stoppin' there tonight. You and me."

"Brayson," came the reply, her eyes blazing, "Moose Cardigan will kill you for that! I saved your life yesterday—kept him from killing you! Now nothing under God's sun can save you!"

A smile crept over the man's coarse features, a smile that still further infuriated May Clintock.

"Cardigan ain't goin' to interfere none. You see, he's dead. That's why."

"You lie!"

"Suit yourself there," said the man, "only I'm tellin' you he *is* dead. And now you're comin' with me."

A sickening feeling, a faintness akin to nausea, swept over May Clintock at hearing these words. For there had been a something in Brayson's face and in the tone of his voice that made her believe that he was *not* lying when he had said Moose Cardigan was dead. It was as though a cruel physical blow had been dealt her. The future loomed barren and black, indeed.

"If I go with you, Brayson," she said. "it will be dead."

But her words lacked something of their former keenness. The momentary dizziness had not yet left her. And in the following instant, before she could even swing the club, she was hurled in the snow. And Brayson was upon her.

CHAPTER VI
All Trails Have Their End

CARDIGAN was sitting on a fallen tree-trunk beside his noon-day camp-fire when his danger first dawned on him. He had finished his meal and was about to rise to his feet when this knowledge came to him: a sudden stab of pain in his vitals. In another second or two this pain seemed to sweep over his whole body. He jumped to his feet.

"Ptomaine!" he gasped; "that meat must have been bad!"

Even as he spoke, something inside him seemed to wrench him in twain; his inner muscles constricted; pain after pain shot through him. He made a quick move toward the sled. There, he knew, lay his salvation: his medicine-kit!

Under the canvas lashings of the sledge, his hands came in contact with the precious first-aid box. He snatched it out. Threw back the cover. Then staggered back a step. The box was empty!

"Gone — everything!" he groaned. "I've been robbed!"

The forest about him, wrapped in a driving snowstorm, seemed to go on the instant black before his eyes. An agonizing ache had taken hold of his strong body. The poison was working fast. Then, for a moment, his sight cleared a little, and he saw something white

lying in the bottom of the empty tin box. He picked it up quickly, and read:

"So you planned on killin' me eh? Well I guess this will sorta save you the trouble. Me, I'm gettin' out of this damn country. I've made my pile. And I'm takin' old man Clintock's girl with me. Goodby."

"So I've been poisoned! The food I left on the sled last night was poisoned! And now he's taking it out on that sweet girl!"

This thought served to bring back all the old fighting spirit in the man—the spirit of never-say-die that made all Alaskans admire him. There was yet one thing he could do, he knew. It was just a bare chance. And he did it.

And then, something within him made him turn his eyes up to where the tops of the spruces swayed dimly in the storm, and his lips formed the words:

"God, if the breaks are against me, and I die, see to it that Brayson gets what is coming to him. I probably can't save that sweet little girl from him now, but make him pay, God! *Make him pay!*"

BRAYSON, towering above the limp, unconscious form of May Clintock, waited eagerly for the first sign of returning consciousness in the girl. In the dim light from the flickering candle burning in the neck of an empty whiskey bottle on the table, all the baseness in his face was revealed. His face was flushed. A mighty passion ruled him. His eyes were fastened upon the figure in the bunk before him.

Suddenly her eyes opened wide. And to her in that instant there came a full and appalling comprehension of what faced her. A hideous thought came to her. She would have cried out, but words failed her.

He must have read her thought. For he laughed coarsely, and said:

"Sure I have."

"You lie!" she cried desperately.

"Do, eh?"

"Yes, you lie!"

But her eyes gave the lie to the certainty in her words. It was as though an awful black void faced her.

"Come, sit up!" he commanded; "yes, I lied. I wondered how you'd take it. I haven't gone to all this trouble to take you that way. I'm not such a fool as that. I've kissed you, though. And you're nice."

"You brute!" cried the girl, struggling to her feet and fronting him.

"Easy there!" commanded Brayson, and he gripped her arms in hands that were big and strong. And he crushed her to him, kissing her again and again full upon the mouth.

She fought to repel him, but the blow he had dealt her out there on the trail had sapped her strength, and her bodily weakness was no match for her courage. She was like a child in the big man's arms. Despair gripped her because she knew there was no hope. The man's blow had left her weak, very weak. And he was strong. Now it was, she knew, only a matter of time. Black mists began to creep into her consciousness; all her strength seemed to leave her.

THROUGH the gloom of the snow-filled night, a feeble flicker of light reached Cardigan. And his heart leaped. For he felt certain that that light marked the end of the half-obliterated trail he had been following. There he would find May—and the man he was going to kill.

But he was weak. Very weak. And it would be days before his old-time strength returned. The poison had worked havoc with his system. Even the strong salt coffee he had gulped back there, and which had enabled him to vomit that which was killing him, had failed to save him from a great deal of pain. And now he was weak, and riding the sled.

He lay propped up, his eyes active, and thanking his Maker that he had a team of malemutes which could mush without commands—and which *would* mush, without being driven to, on such

a night as this, when that north world was being swept by blinding wind and snow, when the mercury hovered low, and when the trail was little better than a frozen hell.

A deadly calm took hold of him at this moment; a calm that at the same time fostered a dread of what he might find in that cabin that loomed just a little ahead.

He stopped his dogs; staggered to his feet, and made toward the cabin. He stumbled as he went, and scarcely could keep his feet. But for some reason or other, this great weakness that had mastered his muscles did not appall him. It is probable that he did not stop to reason that he was in a pitiable condition to fight the fight of his life.

He threw himself against the door, apparently forgetful of the fact that the bells on his dogs' harness must have heralded his coming. He did not know that within the cabin, a man was covering that doorway with his gun.

There can be no doubt that it was May Clintock who saved Moose Cardigan's life the next instant. She heard the sound of the man at the door; saw Brayson covering that door with his gun—and she grasped the horror of the situation. She hurled herself against Brayson, and the bullet that in all likelihood would have "got" Cardigan, was diverted. It crashed into the woodwork just to the left of the door.

At the same time, her action unbalanced Brayson somewhat, and when he regained his equilibrium, it was to find himself looking into the cold blue muzzle of a revolver—with a pair of cold blue eyes to match.

A death-like pallor came over Brayson's countenance.

"Drop—that—gun—Brayson!" The words had the edge of tempered steel and the other's weapon clattered to the floor.

"And now look me in the eye—if you *can!*—if you've got the *nerve!*"

He was a little crouched forward as he stood there on the threshold, his parka-covered bulk nearly filling the door space. And there was that terrible look in his narrowed eyes that the girl had noted before.

"Brayson," he went on in that deadly level tone. "I could drop you in your tracks now—with this gun. But I'm not going to. It'd be too all fired good for you. This is what.... I said *look* at me....this is what I'm going to do to you...."

And May Clintock, standing a little back of Brayson, and to one side, suddenly felt herself go cold as she saw what the man in the doorway was going to do. At the same time, the womanhood in her that made her love a man of his stripe, thrilled at his present act.

"Oh, you splendid, splendid fool," she breathed; "you courageous fool!"

Slowly, deliberately, he had sheathed his revolver, and was holding out his unmittened hands toward the other man.

"This is how, Brayson," he said low. *"Now* do you understand? It's these two hands of mine—not a bullet—that are going to finish you. There are some things a man can't forget—and can't forgive.

"What you've done to the people here in camp back there—and to this girl—is one of them. What you did to my brother back there in Manchester, is another. No, you haven't forgotten! You framed him for a robbery you did, and he went to jail for it. He hadn't been there long when his health broke down, and he died. All because of you, Brayson. You *skunk!* Now will you put up your hands?"

The girl was quick to read the sudden expression that sprang into Brayson's face, and in the next instant she had acted. So quick was her action that neither of the men saw it till it was nearly completed. Then it was too late for them to interfere. She had snatched up Brayson's revolver from the floor, and now she had him covered with it.

"Moose," she said with grim determination, "if you take another step toward him, I'll kill him! *I'll* shoot

him! You're in no condition to fight now. You're weak, Moose. Don't you understand — *weak*. You can scarcely stand on your feet! And Brayson is just waiting to kill you! Now you listen to me!"

And he did. Because he knew that when she had said she would shoot Brayson, she meant it. For the moment, while she told him what was in her mind, he seemed to waver there on the threshold, it was as though a fight were being waged within himself. But in the end there was forced in upon him the wisdom of what she dictated, with a revolver to back up that dictation.

Men up along the Yukon there still tell of that pitched fight between Moose Cardigan and a man who was known as Brayson. How it was fought there in that hard-hit placer settlement with all those old miners looking on. They love to tell it—these Alaskans—in the glow of their camp-fires, of how Brayson was battered, beaten, humiliated before all mankind by this man Cardigan. Beaten down in fair fight by a man who had two fists, and who knew how to use them.

It was a fight that will live in the minds of those men of the North as long as there are tongues to tell it and pass it on, because the man who won it was a man who was loved and respected by all.

But there are only two who know that a girl was behind it.

Battling Musk-Oxen on Ice Floes

After Admiral Robert E. Peary had discovered the North Pole and hung the Stars and Stripes on it, he set out to try to reach his homeland once more.

An easy matter, one might think, having traversed the lands to the pole? In truth, things don't work out that way in the Arctic through the killing cold and driving snows covering the faint trails of man. The return of Peary's brave party was a much more perilous struggle than was the "up trip." More desperate chances had to be taken due to the season of the year and the melting and breaking of the ice.

Every fate seemed working against them and for a time it looked as though death was the inevitable end for the entire party. When there were no other obstacles to interfere, it seemed that wild animals sought them out and would harass and torture them with their preyings.

One of their nearest death-knells was sounded in an encounter by Peary and his men when nearly exhausted and struggling along on some groaning ice-floes. They were surrounded by a pack of wild musk-oxen, an animal similar in form to that of the American oxen of pioneering fame of the prairie.

Realizing that the animals were circling for an attack and that offence was the best position, the entire crowd, with poised rifles, rushed out against the oncoming herd, black and thundering. The old bull, who was king of the herd, gave a wild roar and bellow which was the signal to charge.

Peary took careful aim on the great king bull and fortunately the shot went true and the animal fell dead. The stampeding herd was stopped, but before the remaining herd could draw up, six of the oxen were trampled to death.

Peary and his men escaped the clawing arm of death by a hair's breath only, but the day was saved. Strengthened by the new-found fresh meat, so hazardly obtained, the courageous little party one more "mushed" on, in their struggling battle homeward, many more of similar obstacles to overcome before they could claim their well-earned victory.

Black Scar Trail

By U. Stanley Aultman

New Mexico—Kowanche, the Indian, "smothers" a skunk

IT was immediately after the fall round-up in the country surrounding the cow town of Coyote Center down in the south of New Mexico. The town's one pleasure dispensary, the combination Spanish Bulldog saloon and dance hall, was crowded.

Men played poker and faro, danced with the dark-skinned females of Spanish accent, crowded against the long bar, drank, and sang, and swore.

Slim Harlow, a bronze-faced chap in his early thirties, pushed open the swinging doors of the saloon and entered. Slim was part owner of the Triple Cross, one of the largest ranches of the State. He stood at the door for a moment, sweeping the place with his steel gray eyes. Some one opened the door behind him, and he turned to see the man for whom he was searching; one Harvey Dupont, owner of the Triple L ranch and "actin' " sheriff of Coyote Center.

"I done looked all over fer you, Dupont," greeted Slim.

"And yore the galoot I been hankerin' to bump into," answered the old cowman, taking off his wide-brimmed hat and mopping the sweat from his bald head.

The two ranchmen went to a small table a little apart from the others, seated themselves and called up the drinks. The younger man was the first to speak.

"Lose any cattle this year, Harvey?"

"I shore did. 'Bout seventy-five head."

"Well," answered Slim, "it 'pears they's been some rustlin' goin' on in these parts. We was eighty-six short at the Triple Cross."

They sipped their beer thoughtfully for a little while. Harvey Dupont had owned the Triple L ranch for several years, and this was the first time he had ever lost any cattle. Slim Harlow had been a part owner of the Triple Cross for more than six years, and during that time no cattle had been stolen.

These two ranches, the Triple Cross and the Triple L, were by far the largest in the State. Another outfit had come into existence within the last two

years in the vicinity of Coyote Center. It was the Triple Squares, owned by a man whose past was a mystery, one Al Dirk.

"Wonder if that feller, Dirk, is missin' any?" asked Slim.

"I ain't seen him since the roundup," answered Dupont. "He drove quite a bunch to the Forks about a week ago and sold them to a Chicago buyer.

Slim Harlow emptied his glass and proceeded to roll a cigaret. He eyed Dupont as he licked the paper.

"Do you reckon that *hombre* is straight, Harvey?"

"Wall," answered the old man, "I figured maybe he wasn't when I heard he was sellin' off a bunch of cattle, so I sent one of my punchers to the Forks to do a little detective work. He looked the cattle over, and come back and says they is all branded with the Triple Squares."

There followed a brief silence in which Harvey Dupont eyed his younger companion with the semblance of a grin behind his short-cropped beard.

"Is this here Al Dirk hurtin' yore feelin's by galvinatin' around yore partner, Slim?" he asked.

"I like the gal right well, Harvey."

"Wall, how come you don't marry her then?"

"I don't know," answered Slim. "Guess maybe I ain't got as much good looks as Al Dirk or somethin'. You figer I ought to marry the gal just becuz she happens to be my partner, Harvey?"

"Wall, you couldn't help bein' her partner, you young galoot, and it ain't yore fault. 'Duke' Belcher give you that half interest in the Triple Cross fair and square when he croaked six year ago. He owed it to you for what he stole from you back in Texas, didn't he? Slim Harlow? It 'pears to me that gal ought to be right glad to marry you, becuz you saved her from tyin' herself up to that there skunk Belcher."

"Maybe so," agreed Slim, taking the last puff from his cigaret. "I ain't said nothin' to the gal becuz I reckoned she was too loco about this here Al Dirk, and I figured my chances was pretty slim."

Young Harlow had just finished speaking when Al Dirk himself walked to the table and seated himself between the two men. He was a dark, handsome chap about Slim's age.

"Howdy," he greeted. "The drinks are on me, men."

"How come?" Dupont wanted to know.

"Joan Jones promised to marry me last night."

Slim Harlow dropped his head at the words. His spirits lowered with the moments. A battle seemed to rage in his heart. He loved Joan Jones, and now the full realization of that truth went home with a pang. It was with a great effort that he raised his head and forced a smile.

"I'm right sorry to take your partner away from you, Slim," said Al Dirk, smiling as he ordered the drinks, "but I guess maybe you'll get along without her all right, eh?"

"I reckon so. And I shore hope you'll be good to the gal."

The three ranchmen stood upon their feet and touched glasses. They did not drink. A hush had fallen over the patrons of the Spanish Bulldog. Every one was staring towards the swinging doors. A well-proportioned Indian stood there, his arms folded across his broad, naked chest, his head held high. The feather of an eagle was slanted backward in the thick black hair that fell to his muscular shoulders. The expression of his face was cold and grim.

"I AM Kowanche," he was saying. "I have traveled far. I am well educated in the speech and manners of your race. You need not be ashamed to welcome me, proud white men."

Not a man moved. They were awed to silence by this intelligent Indian's very presence, struck with admiration by his physical perfectness. It smacked of

power, the whole of him. A drunken cowboy chuckled; a dancing girl giggled. But they were quickly silenced.

"I have come among you to ask a simple favor," Kowanche went on, and only his lips moved as he spoke. "In return for that favor you may drink your fill at my expense."

He took from his trouser pocket a small bag of gold nuggets and deftly tossed it upon the bar. Black Ben Sanders, king of the Spanish Bulldog, picked it up and appraised its contents. His face lighted with avaricious pleasure. He spoke:

"Let 'er rip, Chief. What is this here favor yore wantin'?"

"I request," said the Indian, "that every white man in the house remove his hat as I pass before him."

At this singular request, quick, puzzled glances were exchanged. The word "loco" was heard, but not above a whisper. Black Ben was decidedly enthused. It meant gold in his pocket. He climbed upon the bar and smiled down upon his patrons.

"This here Cowhanch, or whatever his name is, ain't askin' much, and he's givin' a lot, gents. Supposin' we all line up and do what he's askin'?"

Several men nodded and lined themselves up with their backs to the long bar. Soon the others, one by one, hesitatingly followed their example, all save the three ranch owners at the small table. The dancing girls gathered in a bunch at the rear of the room and looked on.

The Indian started at one end of the line. Each man removed his hat as the redskin passed along. He seemed to focus his glance on a spot about an inch above the left eye of each man. It took him but a moment to reach the other end of the line. Three men remained to be examined: Harvey Dupont, Slim Harlow, and Al Dirk. Kowanche walked toward the small table around which they were standing.

Slim Harlow came first. He removed his hat at once. Harvey Dupont came next. He readily complied, and like the others, was passed up. Al Dirk was the last man to be examined. He had walked around the table and stood now with his back to the wall. His hand was on the butt of his six-gun as the Indian stood before him. He made no motion to remove his hat. Kowanche waited a moment, then spoke.

"The white man who refuses to comply with my request is possessed of a guilty heart," said he.

"You go plumb to hell!" swore Al Dirk. "I ain't doffin my hat for no man, and I shore won't do it for a damned redskin."

Harvey Dupont sidled over close to the angry man. Slim Harlow moved quickly out of range. In the next minute every man in the place had disappeared behind the bar or out the door. Tables were overturned in the scramble and men squatted behind them for protection.

Kowanche's right hand shot out toward the wide-brimmed hat. Al Dirk stepped quickly to one side, his six-shooter drawn and ready to bark.

"Try that again, and you'll take a long trip to yore happy huntin' ground," he warned.

Harvey Dupont stepped between them.

"Put up yore shootin' iron, Al Dirk," he ordered. "And you vamoose, Chief. I reckon maybe yore all right, but you'd better come around some time when this here galoot's feelin' a little friendlier."

"Kowanche will go with great pleasure," said the Indian, then turned to the slowly gathering group behind him. "White men, you may now drink at my expense. Kowanche is well repaid."

They watched the Indian pass out through the swinging doors into the night, then gathered at the bar to drink up the value of his gold nuggets, and exchange their opinions of Al Dirk. They wonderingly recalled now that Dirk had never been seen without a hat on his head, and *that* hat always pulled

well down over the left side of his forehead. Why?

Two weeks later Slim Harlow was seated on a stool in the shade of the Triple Cross ranch house. He hummed a tune to dispel the feeling of dejection in his heart while he vigorously shined the brass on his saddle. He heard Al Dirk ride up, and through the bushes he could see him seated on his roan mare, waiting.

A step was heard behind, and Slim turned to face Joan Jones, his partner. She was dressed in a while blouse with a bandanna handkerchief tied neatly around her throat, a new riding skirt, and a pair of well-polished, high-heeled boots. Her wide-brimmed hat was tipped back just far enough to display a wisp of black, silky hair. She was prettier, he thought, than he had ever seen her.

"Well, Partner," said she, looking down at him with what Slim did not recognize as a forced smile, "this is my wedding day, and you haven't congratulated me."

Slim rose slowly to his feet and stood there gazing out across the flat expanse of sagebrush land toward the far-away mountains to the north.

"I reckon you and Al Dirk will be livin' here as soon as yore spliced up," he drawled.

"Oh, I don't know," answered the girl. "I sort of figured on selling my half interest in the ranch to you, Slim. Al and I may decide to live at the Triple Squares."

"I don't want to buy," said Harlow. "I'd ruther sell my share in the Triple Cross, and hit the trail back to Texas."

Joan Jones placed herself squarely in front of him and stamped her right foot.

"Slim Harlow, I want to know what's the matter with you. Don't you want me to marry Al Dirk?"

"I ain't hankerin' to say, Gal."

"Well, listen here, Partner," the girl went on. "I've simply got to marry some one. It was all right for you and I to be partners in this here ranch before mother died a few months ago, but it don't look right now. Pretty soon people will start talking. And since Al Dirk was good enough to propose—well."

Slim placed his hand on her shoulder. It trembled there.

"Gal," said he, "that galoot ain't half good enough fer you. I ain't shore, but I reckon he done pulled off some kind of dirty work before he drifted in to these parts. That Indian is still galvinatin' around, and I'll bet my hat he's after Al Dirk's blood for some reason or other. When a redskin starts out after revenge he most allus gets it. I reckon you ought to wait a bit longer, Gal."

Miss Jones lowered her head and stood there very thoughtful for a moment. Finally she turned to go, and Slim Harlow did not see the tear that glistened on her cheek.

"Are you coming for the wedding, Slim?" she called over her shoulder.

"I reckon so," he answered; but in his heart he knew that he would not.

He walked out to the corner of the house and watched Al Dirk and the girl ride away towards Coyote Center, and then, with a feeling of utter dejection, drove his hands to the bottom of his trouser pockets and ambled off towards the corral. There he found six of his cowpunchers perched on the top rail of the fence, like so many crows. They were rather glum and strangely silent, he thought.

"Ain't you galoots goin' in to the weddin'?" he inquired.

Not one of them made an attempt to speak. Old Hank Rister climbed down after a little and walked slowly toward the bunk house. One by one the other five followed suit, until Slim found himself alone.

What the devil was wrong with them? Harlow wondered. They had never acted that way before. He knew they all liked him—any one of them would fight for him. He interlocked his hands be-

hind him and started for the bunkhouse, resolved to do some questioning. They were perched up on the mess table when he entered.

"What's got into you galoots?" he wanted to know. "If me and Joan ain't payin' you enough wages, I'll have a talk with her about raisin' you."

"It ain't that," said Hank Rister. "If yore wantin' the straight dope about this here thing, we all think yore a danged fool."

Slim eyed the old puncher with an air of solicitation, nervously fumbling with a button on his leather vest.

"I don't savvy what yore hintin' at, Hank."

"I'm hintin' at this here weddin' today. Joan Jones is loco about you, and you ain't got sense enough to know it. You done let her ride off to marry what we all thinks is a no-good skunk what ain't been in these parts long anuff to 'stablish his ped-agree. It ain't right, Slim."

"How'd you know she's loco about me?"

"She done told Maria, the cook. And last night Maria says the gal was cryin' herself asleep becuz you don't love her."

"It's a danged lie. I do love the gal, and I don't give a whoop who knows it."

So saying Slim Harlow turned and got out of the bunkhouse, then mosied off towards the corral gate, cursing himself for having an over-supply of timidity. He heard one of the punchers let out a yell, and turned to see the six of them come running with their saddles.

"What you fixin' to do?" he asked, as they hurried past him.

They paid no attention to his question. In a short space of time they had roped and saddled their horses and were riding out through the corral gate.

"Where are you danged galoots goin'?" Slim demanded.

"We're aimin' to stop that fool weddin', Slim, if we hafta shoot up the whole town, includin' the preacher!" yelled Hank Rister over his shoulder. And the six cowpunchers rode madly in the direction of Coyote Center.

"Danged fools!" muttered Slim, then made a dive for the bunkhouse, brought out his saddle, and ran for the corral. His long-legged bay was standing at the gate, whinnering, as if he were as anxious as his master to be gone.

Coyote Center was fifteen miles away. By this time Joan and Al Dirk would be about half way, Slim thought. He leaned forward in the saddle, fixed his eyes on a cloud of dust a mile or so ahead, applied the spurs to his bay, and raced along the trail in hot pursuit. Presently he could no longer see the dust. The riders ahead had stopped. Soon he could see them standing quite still. The punchers had dismounted. Something had happened.

In a little while he had reached the scene. Joan Jones was lying about ten feet to the right of the trail. Two of the men were untying the rope with which she was bound. Slim reached her side just as she struggled to her feet.

"What happened, Joan? Hurry, Gal. Tell us pronto," he urged.

"Kowanche! The Indian!" she gasped. "He tied me, knocked Al senseless and took him away."

"Which way did he go?" asked Slim.

"I was on my face, half unconscious. I don't know," she answered.

The men shaded their eyes and gazed in every direction. All that could be seen not inanimate was several horsemen coming pell-mell from the direction of Coyote Center. In a little while they were near enough to be recognized. It was part of the Triple L gang. They were swinging their hats and shouting. Harvey Dupont was the first to rein up.

"We rode out to escort the bride and groom into town," said he, jovially.

"Yore too late," said Slim. "The groom is done gone."

"Whatinells happened?" asked the old cowman.

"Kowanche's stole the groom," answered Hank Rister. "I reckon maybe he done found out what was under Al Dirk's hat," he grinned.

"Well," said the "actin'" sheriff, "there's no time to be standin' around. Kowanche'll have the galoot scalped by this time. Wonder which way he went?"

Everybody shaded their eyes to sweep the surrounding country. Harvey Dupont was the first to see a curl of smoke rising to the sky a half mile or so to the north.

"Must be the Indian," said Dupont, slapping his horse's neck. "Let's be goin'," and he led the way at a swift gallop.

Slim Harlow and the girl brought up the rear, and as they rode along she described the attack.

"Kowanche was hiding behind the mesquite, mounted on a spotted mustang. We did not see him until he rode out into the trail, aiming a rifle at us. He struck Al with something and knocked him senseless, then jerked me from the saddle and bound me."

"Did he say anything, Joan."

"Yes; but I didn't understand it. My ears were full of dirt, and I was fighting to free myself. He said something about reaching the end of Black Scar Trail. I wonder what he meant, Slim?"

"Reckon maybe Al Dirk's got a black scar on his head somewhere," answered Slim.

"Why, he has," she cried. "I saw it today just after we left the ranch. His hat blew off. There was a black scar right above his left eye."

The riders ahead had slowed down to a walk. They were nearing a small, cone-shaped hill. Large bowlders were scattered here and there. Presently they stopped. Harvey Dupont motioned Slim and the girl to come up.

What they saw caused Joan Jones to cover her eyes and turn away. Al Dirk was tied face up across a large bowlder, his body stripped to the waist. Upon his chest were three red brands that death alone could wipe away:

They represented the marks of three ranches, the Triple L, the Triple Cross, and the Triple Squares. Near the bowlder a heap of smouldering ashes and three branding irons gave mute testimony of the Indian's atrocity.

"THE white man is not dead!

It was the voice of Kowanche. He was standing erect with folded arms on the top of a giant bowlder some distance ahead. He made an impressive picture there, his perfect and powerful figure outlined against the sky, his head bowed slightly as he looked down with sober mien upon the group of puzzled, awe-struck whites.

Some of the cowpunchers dismounted at Dupont's order, and began loosening the ropes that held Al Dirk to the rock. Kowanche spoke slowly and evenly while this was being done.

"More than two years ago this man passed through our country with a small herd of cattle. I was away at college. There was a beautiful maiden in our tribe whom we called Nanche. I had promised to return and marry her. This white man attempted to harm her. To escape him, she leaped from a high cliff to her death.

Nanche's father was an old man. He had followed and overpowered the shameless creature who caused the maiden's death. He built a fire to torture him, but the white man's friends came to the rescue in time. That black scar above the white man's left eye was made by Nanche's father when he attempted to gouge out his eyes with a brand from the fire."

The men had untied Al Dirk and laid him face upward on the sand at the side of the bowlder. They all glanced down to see the scar.

"How come it's black, Chief?" asked Hank Rister.

"That is the Indian's secret," returned

Kowanche, then went on with his story.

When the white man was saved by his friends he shot Nanche's father. My brother found him before he died, and it was from my brother that I heard of the white man's crime.."

"I don't savvy why you put these here brands on him for," said Harvey Dupont.

"I will tell you," continued Kowanche. "You have lost many cattle in the last year. This white man is the thief. I branded him as my part of the revenge he well deserves, and to make it known that he is not worthy of his own race."

"I don't savvy," said Slim Harlow.

"I will try to enlighten you. It is not difficult to make a cross from an L, and it is easier to make two squares from a cross. Look closely at the brands on his chest and you will understand. Since I have been in your country I have seen the white man do this. You should thank Kowanche for leaving Al Dirk alive for you to punish."

Dirk had raised himself to a sitting posture, and watched the Indian from the corner of his eye.

"Say somethin', Al Dirk," said Dupont, eyeing the man. "Is this here Indian tellin' the truth?"

The owner of the Triple Squares feebly nodded his head.

"Well, you danged dirty skunk," swore Dupont. "And you was aimin' to marry Joan Jones, the finest gal in these parts. Get yoreself up from there and come along. You ain't got half what's comin' to you."

He glanced up at the Indian.

"Kowanche, yere welcome in Coyote Center any old time you feel like droppin' around. Savvy?"

"I understand, and I thank you," returned the Indian, "but Kowanche's place is with his people."

They rode away with their prisoner. Slim Harlow and the girl brought up the rear. When they were some distance away the two stopped their horses and looked back. Kowanche was still standing upon the high bowlder. When he saw them watching he raised both his arms above his head and then allowed one to drop."

"I wonder what he means?" asked the girl.

"I reckon maybe he means we are two now, but pretty soon we'll be one," he grinned.

"Dia de Gloria!"

Dia de Gloria — day of glory — means a thrill to the ferocious Yacqui Indians of Lower California and Sonora.

Over the far-flung silences of desert sands come the distant weird chantings of an eerie tune; tom-toms boom with a low and awesome pound. Festooned and gaudy-colored dresses are going through queer antics—odd shrieks rend the air, then you see grotesque leaping forms performing their symbolic movements over the desert lands. Nothing interrupts, not even a lashing wind with tossing sand, for the ceremony must go on.

It is the Eastertide—a blending of Christian and Pagan religion, portraying the betrayal of Christ by Pilate, and the spirit of Easter.

The dance goes on in wild and confused—yet regulated orgy of a primitive people. Now and again one of the participators will drop from sheer exhaustion; perhaps he may recover, but perhaps he may not, passing on to his "happy hunting ground." No matter, be he young brave, aged warrior, or dainty squaw, the dance of honor—if need be the dance of death —must go on, 'ere the Leaders of Destiny become angered and throw searing misfortune over the tribe.

For over three hundred years this ceremony has been an annual festival for the Yacquis, and perhaps—even probably—the ceremony will carry forward another three hundred, so securely are they cut off from civilization in their lonely outposts of an almost unknown world.

The Crimson Grip

By Ray Lapham

Far North—losing your man in the Northwest Mounted is no laughing matter

CORPORAL McRAE paused to rest his aching legs and peered through the screen of underbrush into a little opening, in the midst of which stood a log-cabin, the chimney, puffing smoke.

McRae smiled in grim satisfaction. The occupant was at home. He moved forward cautiously, undid and hid his snowshoes in the brush. Then he crept around the enclosure, under cover, and advanced stealthily toward the cabin from the side opposite the small, square window.

At sight of McRae's tall form in the doorway, the bearded man within dropped the frying pan he was holding and shot big, chunky hands toward the wall against which leaned a Winchester rifle.

"Put them up!"

These words in the Mounty's crisp voice changed the man's resolution, and he slowly full-masted both arms.

McRae surveyed his captive with satisfaction.

"It ended," he said to the prisoner, "in the same old way."

The bearded one snarled.

"Whatcha call this? I ain't done nothin'."

"That, stated McRae seriously, "is a matter for judge and jury to decide. Let's see; I've got a little article here"—he produced a cartridge—"which I picked up on the shores of Moose Lake. Ever been there, Peterson?"

He slipped the cartridge home in the chamber.

"You see," he said ironically, "it fits."

"I see," replied Peterson, "and there are five thousand thirty-calibre Winchesters in the country."

"But none which lead a straight trail from where a man was killed—by accident."

Out of the glow which followed the slow appearance of the pale sun, the two men moved forward from the wilderness cabin, and hit the trail up river

for Ft. McDowell. McRae's heart was buoyant. He had completed his mission—had got his man and he was returning to Ft. McDowell and Mina La Farge.

He lit a black pipe, and proceeded to leave a streamer of blue smoke in the frosty air.

McRae thought of Mina La Farge. Would she be glad to see him—returning with her father's murderer?

From Mina, his thoughts drifted to Glenn Quint, the man who had been with Peter La Farge at the time of the old man's murder. McRae could not classify Quint. The man's face was a mask. He wondered what the relationship was between Mina and Quint. He had not given credence to the story that they were engaged.

He checked up the details of the case: the coming of the La Farges to McDowell to visit their friend, the factor of that Hudson Bay post; the arrival of Quint a week later, and the trip to Moose Lake; the return of Quint with the body of La Farge.

"A queer affair," was the summary of his cogitations. Why had Peterson murdered La Farge, anyway? Peterson was a sour-dough trapper and La Farge an Edmonton mining man. What mysterious link connected the brutal frontiersman with the fate of the city capitalist?

Mina La Farge! She was a queen of women, before whom McRae bent in adoration. Was he mistaken, or had there been a recognition in the heart of each on their first meeting?

Down the slope which they were descending ran a faint snowshoe trail—the trail made by McRae on his down trip. His eyes followed this trail unconsciously until they struck the tangle of brush and woods at the foot of the slope. Was he mistaken, or did something move at the edge of the timber? The policeman loosened the big revolver in its holster. The object which had caused the disturbance of the brush might be a lynx, but conceivably it might be a confederate of Peterson. Swiftly the two men approached the covert. A man's form came into view at the edge of the timber.

"Quint!" Audibly the policeman spoke the man's name.

"How are you, McRae?" Quint advanced, extending his hand. McRae returned the pressure indifferently.

"Thought I'd come down to see if I could be of any assistance," continued Quint. "Yes, that's the man I saw running through the timber at Moose Lake after the shooting of La Farge. I recognize his beard."

"Good," exclaimed the policeman. "We'll need your testimony." He whirled about, facing Peterson. "Do you still maintain your innocence in the face of identification?"

Peterson growled in his beard a profane affirmative. The party turned into the woods and proceeded southward.

Peterson and Quint were good travelers and McRae had never met his equal on snowshoes; consequently they traveled swiftly. It was mid-afternoon when they came into open country and saw a straight, level sweep before them. Twenty miles southward, at the foot of the snow-capped foot-hills, lay Ft. McDowell, their destination.

Quint's presence seemed to McRae entirely superfluous. He gave little weight to the former's statement of his eagerness to identify the slayer of La Farge. As he followed behind Quint in the snow, he watched him keenly.

They would make McDowell that night, provided McRae's companions held their pace. Peterson was leading, and for some unaccountable reason, set a killing pace. The reason finally penetrated his mind—his prisoner was trying to tire him out. He laughed out loud at the knowledge, and Quint turned with a glance of interrogation. McRae, however, vouchsafed no explanation.

"Think we can make McDowell tonight?" inquired Quint an hour later as

they paused for rest on a swell of the open country.

"Yes," replied McRae, "provided you two can stand the gaff. Peterson's about blown now.

"Too much red liquor," he suggested, looking at the killer. "Give yourself a vacation, Peterson, and there isn't a man in the North that can touch you on snowshoes."

He smiled at the other's scowl.

"Guess his vacation begins today," added Quint.

They prepared to start on. Peterson, who was sprawling full length in the snow, did not rise to his feet.

"It's the damn strap," he told McRae. "It's broke."

With an exclamation of impatience at the delay, the officer stooped to repair it. With his manacles, Peterson was helpless to aid himself.

He did not see the arm lifted above his head; the swift and deadly descent of Quint's hand gripping the barrel of his revolver; nor the signal which passed between the man and Peterson. Instantly the world went black. A thousand shooting stars flashed in meteoric lightning, illuminating for one brief instant this blackness before his pain-filled eye-balls. He fell inertly in the snow.

McRAE knew not how long he lay in the snow, for his eyes opened upon an entirely different scene. The white walls about him suggested what they were, the sides of a tent. He sat up dazedly and focused his gaze upon the only other occupant, a grizzled French-Canadian.

"You feel bettaire now, M'sieu?"

McRae regarded him blankly.

"I don't know," he said. "Where am I? What happened?"

His brain was struggling with a heavy problem—that of his own identity.

"Mounty," supplied the trapper, observing the look of stupefaction on the policeman's face. "T'ree mile nord, zay hit you. Lak does."

He made in pantomime a motion toward his head with a big revolver.

McRae frowned. "I—can't—remember," he said at last. "How was it? Who was it?" He sank wearily back on the blankets and tried to think. The truth became more and more alarming to him. He had forgotten his own name, his purpose.

Again he sat up feebly.

"I know," he said, "that I am a member of the force. My prisoner must have given me the slip."

"Oui," replied the Frenchman excitedly. "Zay tak zee trail for Ft. McDowell. I see hees track."

McRae was unaccountably agitated, but on analyzing his feeling, he could give no reason for it. What, he asked himself, had been his mission? Who were the men who had escaped? Did their escape mean his disgrace? He had a nebular consciousness of his duty as a policeman.

Always his thoughts came back to the same point: Who was he? What was his past experience? He was unable to free his mind of its shackles. Finally he relaxed and slept.

It was morning when he again awoke. Baptiste, the trapper, was preparing to move.

"I'll help," stated McRae, arising and busying himself expertly with the dunnage.

Baptiste looked at him with an expression of superstitious fear.

"You ees still *non?"* he asked, pointing at the corporal's head.

"Still non," replied the policeman smiling, "but I feel better below the neck, Baptiste. Thanks for saving my life, Old Man."

"Zat ees not'ing. I would be *diable* not to save a man from freezing."

The dogs were quickly in their places before the long sledge. Baptiste's whip cracked like a shot from a rifle. Out over the half-frozen snow glided the sledge, bound for Ft. McDowell.

With each diminishing mile, McRae's feeling of complete isolation lessened.

Somehow the name, McDowell, began to take on a significance. He felt his man—the prisoner he had lost—awaited him there.

Baptiste noticed his increasing excitement, and muttered "I bet me beeg hell pop at Ft. McDowell. Zat poleecmans he wake up to heeself."

Recurrently a picture framed itself in McRae's mental vision—the image of a tall man, with expressionless blue eyes. He had seen that face before. Somewhere in the recesses of his dead past, McRae felt that that man had played an important part. Possibly he was the prisoner who had got away.

For several miles the trail had been widening until, as they approached the settlement, it took on the appearance of a beaten road. Men with dog teams passed at irregular intervals. A great hallooing and barking of dogs met their ears as the sledge of the trapper passed a teppee Indian village.

McRae was eager.

"Could I borrow your revolver?" he asked the trapper before separating from him at the edge of the settlement. For answer the Frenchman drew it forth. McRae spun the cylinder, raised and lowered the hammer.

"O. K.," he said. "It's like my ——"

He did not complete the sentence. The sense of the past had lasted for an instant only. He rubbed his forehead. "Well, anyway, it'll do."

McRae started toward the settlement. He paused for a moment looking at the scattered log huts. On the hill above he saw a tall frame building and a flag, floating from a flag-post. He tried vainly to remember what the flag meant.

He was still, in a sense, lost; but possessed of an impelling purpose. This instinct took him aside from the main alley of the little settlement to a cabin, half hiden in the trees by the side of the river. Before this cabin he saw standing the figure of a man and of a woman.

Both turned about at the sound of approaching footsteps, and an expression of surprise issued from the lips of each. With a sudden widening of his eyes, the man took a step backward as if to escape. The Mounty's clear-voiced command halted him.

"Stay where you are. I arrest you for the murder of Peter La Farge."

Struggling with surprise and anger, the girl advanced on the policeman.

"What do you mean?" she cried tempestuously. "How dare you accuse Glenn of my father's murder?"

McRae paid no attention to her, but kept his eyes bent on the face of Glenn Quint.

"Put your hands up," he commanded as Quint's right hand fumbled for a shirt pocket. "Quick!"

There was a flash and a report. Mina La Farge screamed as Quint's knuckles were splashed with a sudden streak of crimson. The pistol, which his hand had held, dropped to the ground.

"You poor boy!" she said in a low voice which trembled with emotion. "The coward!" She was at Quint's side, examining his hand. The bullet had merely seared his knuckles, but roughly enough to cause his grasp on the gun to loosen instantly.

McRae stood by unmoved.

"Prisoner, march," he commanded, when the operation of tying up Quint's hand was completed. "To the jail."

There was no police station at McDowell, but the H. B. factor held the rank of local police officer. He admitted McRae and his prisoner.

"This is bad, McRae," he said shaking his head. "Are you sure of your grounds in arresting Quint? His people are rich and influential in Calgary."

"I want a jail, not an argument," answered McRae smiling. "We're generally pretty sure of our grounds." In a pinch McRae had found that he could rely upon his subconscious mind for words.

With Quint behind the bars he breathed easier.

"Come up to the office and have a smoke," the factor said to him as they left the log-walled building which served

as a detention house. "Tell me all about it."

"Sorry," replied McRae. "I've got to get back and look after my outfit. See you later."

He felt relieved when McGregor, the factor, had departed. The sharp-eyed old Scotchman seemed already to be smelling a rat in consequence of the policeman's behaviour. McRae had caught him more than once looking at him questioningly. The bandage, placed by the trapper, Baptiste, on the policeman's head, had immediately attracted the attention of the factor, and McRae's replies to sundry direct queries had been anything but explicit.

He saw the slim figure of Mina La Farge coming from the cabin by the river. He paused as she approached. She fixed him with a scornful eye.

"I withdraw my good opinion of you, Corporal McRae. Glenn told me all about it; how you lost your prisoner and had to bring in some one to save your face; how he escaped from you. Now you are here. I defy you to injure Glenn. I shall accompany him south and, if you dare to accuse him——"

Her passion choked the flow of words.

McRae found himself admiring her fiery spirit. The rare beauty of her dark eyes held him spellbound. Suddenly her name came back to him, just as that of Peter La Farge had when he arrested Quint.

"Mina," he said earnestly, "Miss La Farge. When you know the details you will be willing to reserve your opinion."

She laughed scornfully.

"My opinion is already made up. Now, do your worst with Glenn. He shall not lack one defender."

Though at a loss to understand it all, McRae, filled with an unaccountable emotion, bowed low and turned away.

The policeman looked up Baptiste. Giving him a government cheque, blanks for which he found in the pocket of his service coat, he purchased the Frenchman's revolver, dog team and outfit. It happened that the man was abandoning his trap line.

The nearest police station, he learned from Baptiste, was a hundred miles south. McRae secured a map and studied the trails. He was surprised at times at the flashes of memory which brought back odd pieces of knowledge regarding routes and country. At seven in the morning he was ready to start for Stewart, his objective.

When dog team and prisoner were ready, a hitch occurred. Mina La Farge, dressed for the trip, appeared with Factor McDougal, and startled McRae with the information that she was going to accompany them. As McRae was about to refuse permission, McDougal laid his hand upon the young man's shoulder.

"Let her go, son," he exclaimed. "Let her go. She's a wild-cat born and'll follow you, anyway. She's got it in her head that it's spite work against Quint. He's got her believing it."

McRae looked at Mina, the fingers of memory groping back. Then he nodded his head. "All right," he said. He called to his dogs, and without a word to the girl, who followed at Quint's side, he lunged forward.

The cabins of the settlements disappeared, and soon the two men and the woman were traveling through the mazes of a Northern wilderness, guided by a defective brain, but which, nevertheless, directed instinctively southward toward the police post-office of Stewart.

FOR an entire day scarcely a word did Mina La Farge speak to him. All day she traveled by the side of Quint, stubbornly refusing the invitation of McRae to ride on the sledge. At night she ate her own snack apart from the men, and spread the blankets she had brought, at a wide distance.

The next morning, when they were ready to start, McRae spoke. "We're going to be trail-pardners for several days, Miss La Farge. Don't you think we'd get sort of tired snubbing one an-

other all that time. I've asked you twice to admire the view."

"It's nice," she said indifferently, and turned her attention to Quint, but McRae's pulses beat faster. He had obliged her to recognize him.

All day they followed a winding trail through the timber. East, west, north and south, the view was screened by a vast forest of perpetual green, flecked with stars of glittering, frozen snow. Beneath the trees, the dog team passed like a wraith—the three human figures toiling beside the sledge.

At noon, Quint growled out his discomfiture, and McRae consented to his taking up space on the sledge after he had again expostulated with the girl. They continued their journey, bearing ever southward.

"Where," inquired the policeman, during a breathing spell on the trail, "did you learn the art of hiking, Miss La Farge?"

There was a flickering smile on her lips as she replied: "My father taught me. I was his trail pal." The smile died, and tears filled her eyes. McRae looked away.

Later, as he walked behind her in the trail, his eyes fastened on her supple form admiringly. "Why," he asked himself, "does she hate me—the only girl I've ever cared to look at twice?"

He sighed as her eyes wandered compassionately to the huddled figure on the sledge. "Loves him," a voice whispered in the Mounty's ear. That voice had a face to match, with green glaring eyes. He flicked out the coils of his whip viciously. The leader sprang in the traces.

The dog team toiled up a ridge of razor-back steepness. A forest loomed above. Quint was in the lead, the position which McRae always assigned him when the prisoner was unmanacled, and Mina, genuinely fatigued at last, toiled in the rear. They had reached the back of the ridge at the edge of the timber.

Something like a whistle of relief ended on Quint's lips. The Mounty halted his dogs, and turned a keen glance on the prisoner. His eyes rested with suspicion on Quint's face.

It was the cry of alarm from Mina which brought the policeman to his knees behind the sledge just as a rifle flashed from the fringe of woods. He drew his own weapon and fired twice. The vision of a skulking form had appeared in the shadows.

McRae crouched low beside the sledge, firing at the shadowy figure in the pines. Suddenly the weight of Quint's powerful body crashed upon his shoulders. He twisted about attempting to use his revolver, but strong fingers jerked at his wrist. The gun exploded harmlessly and fell to the snow, wrenched loose by the suddenness of the attack.

They fought like beasts, each trying to pin his enemy beneath him. Both were strong, athletic, and versed in the art of grappling.

McRae twisted his long legs about the body of Quint. Spasmodically he tightened, straightened them, gouging with his sharp knees into the man's stomach. He was winning. The other screamed aloud in pain. In desperation Quint flung out an arm. A smashing blow on the jaw dazed the officer and he relaxed his grip.

"Got you now!" yelled his assailant, gripping with long fingers at McRae's throat. The policeman threw him off with a backward jerk of his powerful neck. Quint struck again. Blood gushed from a wound in McRae's mouth where teeth bit flesh. He put up a hand, dazed and sick. Quint seized his advantage. Something smote McRae's jaw-hinge—something with the impact of an iron club. He keeled backward, blinded, a roaring of mighty waters in his ears. Consciousness vanished.

QUINT rose shakily to his feet, one hand supporting his balance by gripping the sledge.

"Now!" he cried, hoarse with rage. "I've got you, you——" Seizing the

hand-axe which lay under the dunnage ropes on the sledge, he whirled it aloft. Blood vengeance shone from his reddened eyes.

In that instant he stood revealed to Mina La Farge for what he was. The stark, foul soul of the man was laid bare to her shrinking vision.

She called out sharply. McRae's revolver was in her slender, capable hand.

"Stop or I fire!"

Quint lowered the axe.

"Mina!" he cried, in vexation. "You?"

The words rushed in a torrent from the angered girl's lips. "You would kill him like that—like a dog! Coward! Murderer! Put up those hands. I believe it now. Yes, it is true. You killed my father."

Choked with anger, shame, and disillusionment, she went on furiously.

"Put on the handcuffs. Get on the other side of the sledge."

With lowered eyes, Quint obeyed. He attempted to explain. She cut him short. "Don't speak. Don't even look at me. Oh, I was a fool. A fool!"

She rushed to the fallen policeman and commenced bathing his face tenderly, picking up handfuls of snow.

McRae's eyes flickered open.

"How do you feel?" she asked gently.

"All right."

He gazed around him.

"Where's Quint?" In a flash the past flooded back into his numbed conscience, illuminating it like a beam of sunlight.

"Mina!" For the first time since that blow on the trail to McDowell, he recognized the girl of his dreams.

"Quick!" she said, remembering. There was an enemy in the brush; there!" Her finger directed his eyes to the timber. Again he was the policeman, resourceful and alert.

"Prisoner march!"

He took the gun from Mina, and pointed to the shadows of the trees. Protected by their prisoner's bulk, they approached the forest. At the foot of the nearest trunk, Quint stopped as if stuck fast. McRae and Mina approached.

The girl shuddered at the sight of the thing on the ground. McRae bent over the inert form of the man, Peterson. Gently he felt the breast where a forty-five slug had torn the parka and a blotch of blood showed dark red, staining the garment.

"Peterson!"

Painfully the wounded man opened his eyes. He recognized the officer. His lips moved. McRae bent low to catch the words.

"Quint—he set me on t' kill—La Farga. I'm — sorry—I'm—goin'.—My God!" The last exclamation was a shriek of agony.

McRae lay the figure of Peterson gently back in the snow, and arose.

"So that is the answer," he said slowly. "Mina, for the first time since this man and Quint hit me, on the down trail, I remember all the details of this strange case."

She looked at him with a sudden comprehension in her wide, dark eyes.

"So that was why you treated me so —like a stranger." She paused, a vivid flush ripening upon her smooth, olive cheek. "I thought—you were changed—because you believed Quint my father's murderer. You acted so strangely, Mr. McRae."

"And your sympathy for Quint was a pose?"

"Partly. I never liked him—trusted him. It was because my father resented his attentions to me that he killed him. It is all plain now. This dead man was only a tool."

She lowered her head and wept, thinking of her father.

McRae touched her arm gently.

"It will all come out," he said softly. "Time is a great healer, Mina."

He gave his attention to the manacled Quint who had retreated to the sledge during the scene in the timber.

His eyes came back to the dead man. He stooped and lifted the body laboriously to the tree-crotch above their heads.

"To keep it from the wolves," he ex-

plained. "Ill send a man for it when we get to Stewart.

"Come, we had better get under way. The dogs are getting restless."

They returned to the sledge and the excited team. McRae quieted them with a masterful voice. He directed the prisoner to proceed, and again the group took the trail.

"Mina," he whispered, as the two trotted side by side, behind the sledge. "I am most of all glad about dispelling the clouds of mistrust." And she nodded in joyous understanding.

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Riders of the Night Range

By Clee Woods

Border stuff—cattle rustlers, blazing muzzles and a cowgirl with frontier courage

JOE BALLENFORD allowed his lame horse to take his time along the trail that soon was to carry them down into Red Cañon, where the young rancher was building up a good herd. Ahead of him another trail intersected his homeward path and led across the mesa to the headquarters of the big Bar-Y outfit, owned and managed by old Bead Adams.

Coming along this trail were two other horsemen whom Joe recognized as Ed Sands and "Slim" Hoke. At sight of him the two men seemed to spur up their horses a little, so that they gained the crossing a rod in advance of Joe.

"Howdy, boys," called Joe, in his habitual quiet tone.

A nod and a grunt was all he got from the neighbors. The two cowmen set their faces ahead of them and rode on with utter indifference to the man who heretofore had been well liked among them for a number of years.

"That's mighty strange," thought Ballenford. "What do they think I've done?"

The puzzled young cowman rode on to his ranchhouse now deserted by his three punchers out on duty. After rustling up a cold snack he went out to the corral for a fresh horse.

"I'll take you, 'Fuzzy'," he said, to a long-haired dun that wheeled away and looked his rebellion from the opposite side of the corral.

It took but a little while for Joe to rope the animal and cinch a saddle on the quivering back. He then led the unwilling Fuzzy outside the corral and flung himself onto his back. Even as he vaulted upward Fuzzy made a plunge, but it was expected and the lengthy ranchman was in the saddle before the horse's feet hit the ground.

With a series of stiff-legged buck-jumps and an angry squeal, the broncho made a desperate but vain effort to unseat his rider. He had headed down the road and was still indulging in running

plunges into the air when they reached a point where the road made a quick turn around a shoulder of the cañon wall.

Joe had not tried to control his mount's course until he saw that the infuriated Fuzzy might plunge over the embankment at the curve. As he barely turned him in time to prevent this the horse launched himself into the air again, this time heading squarely into a rider who had suddenly appeared from around the curve.

The two horses and riders went down in a mad scramble and Joe got a fleeting glance of a frightened girlish face, a mass of black curls and a slender young body. With instant alertness he leaped clear of his horse, seized the girl around the waist, and sprang away from the horses as they got to their feet.

"Pretty close call for you," he gasped as he set the young lady down. "Are you hurt?"

"Not at all," came the reassuring voice of the girl, "but it did look scary when your horse hit me."

"Let me have your horse a minute, please," Joe asked, as Fuzzy snorted away in temporary victory, "and I'll bring that old boy back."

"No, wait a minute," cried the girl, remembering the seriousness of her mission. "I came to warn you that you are in danger. They're meeting down at father's place to come and get you."

"They? Who? What do you mean?"

"Well, it's the cattlemen hereabouts and they think you're in with 'Devil' Sam Bragg and his outfit, in this rustling that's been going on worse than ever lately. You know what that means."

Joe did know what it meant. For a moment he stood looking at the fair daughter of Bead Adams as though he saw her not. He could scarcely comprehend what she had said. But that explained the actions of Sands and Hoke.

It also explained the coolness he had experienced for some time from his few neighboring ranchers and the fact that two of his riders had quit without giving reasons but three days before.

"What makes them think I'm a cattle thief?" he asked at last.

"For one thing," replied the girl, "none of your cattle have been taken in the five raids of the last three months. It seems there's other reasons but I didn't hear them. I just happened to overhear a few words between Dad and one of the men."

Joe made a move as though to leave, then turned back. He walked over to her, took her hands in his and looked down searchingly into her eyes.

"And you, Betty," he questioned, "what do you think?"

"I know it is not true," she replied without hesitation, at the same time withdrawing her hands gently. "That's why I came to tell you. You must hurry and get away. They'll be here any minute now."

"They don't have to come here," declared the man in a hard voice. "If they think I'm that kind of a skunk, I'll show them better. You say they're gatherin' at your Dad's?"

"Yes, but you're not going down there?" Betty begged, as she read the determination in his face.

Without answering her he took her horse and rode after the wary Fuzzy. When Joe finally drew up with him in charge he was a good distance below where the collision took place. He had no more than started back across the bottom land that opened out at this point in the cañon when he espied a small troop of horsemen coming down into the cañon.

He quickly realized that it was too late to restore Betty's mount to her before the riders would be upon him. He wheeled the horses, trying to keep Betty's on the off side from the cattlemen, and made for a small clump of bushes at the foot of a cliff.

Here he concealed Betty's horse and again mounted the refractory Fuzzy. The broncho, still unconquered, plunged into the air again and darted off with

long plunges and a snort of rage. Joe allowed him to head up the cañon and in this way succeeded in getting near enough to Betty to warn her of her father's approach in time for her to conceal herself.

Fuzzy was quite subdued by the time Adams and ten men drew up around their intended victim. Joe turned and faced his neighbors with no look of recognition on his face. Only a cold stare met the snapping blue eyes of Bead Adams. He waited for the old rancher to speak.

"You seem to know there's trouble in store for you, Ballenford," said the old man, belligerently.

"Looks that way," replied Joe with no change of countenance.

"Well, got anything to say for yourself?"

"If you men wouldn't keep your hands quite so handy to your gun butts, I'd feel more like talkin'. Now, just why do you think I've been rustlin' cattle?"

"How'd you know what we come for, if you ain't guilty?" Adams shot back.

Joe saw that he had made a slip, but was quick to cover it up with, "What else do cowmen gang up for and go after a neighbor?"

"It's no use to deny it, Ballenford," stated the old man in tones of finality. "We got the goods on you. One of our men saw your brother ridin' around my ranch last night after dark. He's been seen with Devil Sam's gang twice before. How come your cattle ain't been bothered since this Homer left you? Looks like Devil Sam's had a fine spy system on our herds, with Homer on his force and you keepin' tab."

"Who says they've seen my brother stealin' cattle?" flared back the accused man.

"I do," asserted Bill Hoke.

"An' me," added Amos Brown.

"I seen 'em last night," volunteered a Bar-Y puncher, "sneakin' 'round our place."

Joe was at a total loss what to reply. His younger brother had persisted in misunderstanding his efforts to keep him out of trouble and four months ago had left with the declaration that he was going to Alaska.

"If my brother has been seen with Devil Sam," he finally said, "I know nothin' of it. I thought he left to go to Alaska and——"

"Maybe," broke in Adams, "you don't know nothin' about my horse bein' tied down there in the bushes neither."

Joe turned his head and saw a Bar-Y man riding toward them and leading Betty's horse.

"I give you credit for havin' a little bit of sense," the rancher went on, "but it looks like you've gone plumb crazy to think you can get away with a thing like this."

It was a hard situation for the young rancher. He did not want to betray Betty's presence and still it was no easy thing to sit there and be accused of horse stealing on top of what had passed already. Had the old man been less intent on punishing the man he had already adjudged guilty, he might have seen Betty's saddle and questioned his unreasonable conclusion.

"And I did give you credit," Joe retorted after a long stare into the old man's face, "with bein' a man of good horse sense, but looks like I'd have to change my mind."

"No back-talk," Adams shouted, angrily. "Boys, let's have it over with."

At the word from their leader two men rode forward. They approached Joe cautiously, however, for two or three in the crowd had seen him beat a man to the draw once in a fight forced on him, and they had heard other stories of his prowess with a gun.

But Joe allowed them to take away his gun without attempting to use it. A rope flew through the air and settled over his head. Still he sat unmoved until Adams began to lead the way toward a handy cottonwood tree.

"FATHER!" The word broke upon the proceedings like the stinging rebuke of a brave captain to mutinous sailors. "Stop that."

"Betty," gasped the astonished Adams, "what're you doin' over here?"

"I'm here to stop this murder," the girl replied more in indignation than admission. "Sands, you turn that rope loose."

The man looked guilty and turned to Adams for orders.

"Joe Ballenford is no more guilty of cattle stealing than you are, father," Betty went on, seeing her momentary advantage. "I swear to you that I know he has nothing to do with Devil Sam or any other—gang—of men."

"I don't see how you know so much," the unconvinced Adams began, in surrender of his immediate intent, "but guess we can't string 'im up with you lookin' on. Ballenford, we're goin' to give you the benefit of the doubt and let you loose with orders to stay afork that horse 'til you're clear out of this country. Keep ridin', do you hear?"

"If you think I'm goin' to run away like that, you'd as well finish what you started," Joe declared, defiantly.

"Amos," ordered Adams, ignoring Joe and Betty, "you and Slim take Ballenford ahead of you and ride to the other side of Blacktail Pass. Turn 'im loose down the other side and see that he keeps goin'. Betty, you can come with me and the rest of you boys had as well go home."

Betty stood irresolute for a moment, protest on the tip of her tongue until a look from Joe told her to let well enough alone. The struggle in her face gave way to assurance and she rode away with her father without further argument.

CHAPTER II

Fate at the Forked Trails

JOE took the nearest route to the trail leading to Blacktail Pass and rode for hours without a word to his conductors. They climbed up the widening, snake-like trail over the mountain and journeyed on through the pass before Slim called a halt around five o'clock.

"Guess you can cut loose here," Slim said, half reluctantly. "You're goin' into a bad country down there in the Miguel Basin and might need this six-gun."

"Much obliged," Joe acknowledged, taking the gun, "I'm glad to have it back, for I think I'm goin' to need it. Tell Adams I'll be back at my ranch before a week passes."

"Better not try it, Joe," counselled Slim, earnestly. Then with a sudden divination of Joe's purpose in such willing submission he added, "unless you can bring back some arguments in your favor."

After being set at liberty Joe pushed on down the trail that led into little Miguel Basin. He knew that Devil Sam maintained his stronghold in Big Miguel Basin and that between the two basins was the Narrows, a low cross section of mountains.

By the trail over this divide he meant to journey into the lair of the notorious cattle rustler whose depredations had been borne for years by the surrounding cattlemen because of lack of organized strength to oust him from his protected rendezvous.

Dusk was approaching when the lone rider, emerging from the mountainous trail, saw a saddled horse near the trail watching him with ears pricked forward. Riding out toward the horse, Joe discovered a groaning man on the ground close to the faithful animal.

"What's the matter, buddie?" he inquired anxiously.

"Snakebit," answered the sufferer thickly. "Was drinking at the spring out there last night—when he hit me—on the side of the head."

With quick apprehension, Joe dismounted and stooped over the prostrate man. It was Homer, his brother. Even in the fading light Joe could see that

his head and face were swollen terribly.

" 'Bout gone, Joe," Homer declared pitifully.

"No, buck up and I'll get you out of here," Joe encouraged.

"Can't last much longer," Homer insisted. "Tried to ride to camp after—it happened but couldn't—stay on horse. Had a little whiskey, but it was soon gone."

"How far is it to your camp?" Joe asked.

"Round eight miles, but don't try—to take me. Can't stand it. Got to tell you something before I kick in."

"Never mind, I know."

"You don't," Homer went on. "I've been a fool—and a—a thief. Been cattle rustling, Joe. Tried to start gang of my own and buck Devil Sam too. All of us young. Camp — on Rainbow Fork."

There in the darkness with this solemn confession forced from his brother's lips, Joe realized that the end was near. And he had no words with which to comfort the conscience-stricken youth. To Joe's code of life the prodigal's folly was unpardonable. He only bowed his head and let the confessor go on in broken, labored breaths.

"We had about decided—to quit—and clear out—of the country. All but Ben. He wanted to join—with Devil Sam. I went down—to see—Betty—before leaving—for good. I love her, Joe. Would have married — her — but——"

He did not get to finish the sentence. A wrenching spasm shook his slender frame and only incoherent mutterings followed. In another twenty minutes Joe witnessed the flight of the last spark of life.

For several minutes the elder brother sat there in brooding silence beside Homer's body. This was the end of the young life he had tried to rescue from early shipwreck by having Homer sent out to the wholesome adventure of the West. But the boy had turned to the unsavory side of the new country instead of its rugged honesty.

"Well, I'll try to make up for what you've done, little fellow," Joe said aloud, "and maybe it won't be so bad. We can't all be saints. Maybe I didn't know how to put you on the right track again."

But there was still another train of thought coursing through the sorrowing man's brain. Homer had told of his love for Betty. Doubtless his unfinished statement had been that Betty loved him and would have married him but for his wild career. Thus concluded Joe when he himself would have given his very soul for the girl's love.

"Now she'll never know, Homer boy," he said in his thoughts, but that you won your battle and left this country for a square life somewhere else—nor of how I feel, either," was added as a grim resolution.

IT was near midnight when Homer's horse carried his double burden up between two rough cabins well secreted back on Rainbow Fork. Joe was not sure of what kind of a reception he would get, but he relied on the horse to assure him a hearing.

He had to call but once before he heard hasty movements within the cabin nearest him and a window slide open. Had the moon been a little brighter he might have seen a rifle barrel thrust out the window before a cautious voice asked, "Who is it?"

"I'm Joe Ballenford," he answered at once, "and I've brought Homer in. Found 'im dying over at the foot of Blacktail Pass."

Three hastily clad men were soon advancing toward him, their guns in their hands.

"What's the matter?" one of them asked.

"Snakebit."

"What was yuh doin' over on this side anyway?" asked a big swart man who seemed to take no great concern in the dead leader.

"Maybe I'll explain that later," Joe returned none too amiably.

"Well, yur might've got shot, comin' in her like this," the man growled.

Soon the newcomer was surrounded by half a dozen young men, none of whom gave the appearance of very great desperadoes. All but Joe's questioner, whom they addressed as Ben, seemed well enough disposed toward the brother of "Bally." This was a welcome sign to Joe, for during that long night ride he had formed a daring scheme in his mind. But at once now he sensed an enemy in the huge Ben Clemens.

As the seven men returned from the newly made grave the next morning, Joe saw Ben pluck Hump Edgars by the sleeve and drop behind with him. When the two finally reached the others in front of a cabin, Hump, clearly in accordance with instructions, essayed the role of mouthpiece for the scheming Clemens.

"If this outfit hangs together, we got to pick out a new boss," he said, "and the quicker the better."

"I just been thinkin' about that too," spoke up Phil Garten. "Devil Sam and his cut-throats is liable to take a swat at us most any time now, and we'd better be ready."

"Boys," Joe began slowly, "I want to see how you stack up on a proposition I've been thinkin' about. Homer told me he was ready to throw up this game and said the most of you were too. I hope every one of you will chuck the foolish idea of bein' madmen and hit out again for honest punchers and three squares a day, but before you break up I want you to go with me to wipe out that Devil Sam nest. If——"

"But see here," broke in Clemens, "we don't——"

"Just a minute," Joe snapped, "and you can have your say. I was sayin', if you help me make this raid, not a one of you will have to leave Vallejo County to find a good job."

"What yuh think this is?" Clemens demanded with a show of bluster, "a sheriff's outfit? I don't see where you got any right to fork in here, Ballenford. The rest of these boys can believe that hatched up tale of yourn if they want to, but how do we know but what the cattlemen on the other side sent yuh over here? I'm fer linkin' up with Devil Sam an' makin' ourselves too damn strong fer any gang of cowpunchers."

"And how do you know, men," Joe asked in his turn, "but what Clemens has his orders from Devil Sam? If you go to that gang, sooner or later you're goin' to run in mighty heavy with the law that's sure to come into these parts. If you'll do as I want——"

"Shut your damn mouth," shouted Clemens angrily. "We'll settle our own affairs.

His hand was hanging close to the butt of his gun.

"That makes somethin' for you and me to settle before anything else is done," Joe stated, quietly. "Throw your gun!"

If Clemens was a coward at heart, his confidence in the use of his six-shooter kept it concealed. His hand seized his gun with the readiness of one who had been desiring this very thing. But the gun did not come up fast enough. Joe's gun cracked in an upward swing from the holster and the heavy bullet ripped through the man's right shoulder, spinning him half way round as his gun was discharged harmlessly.

"Damn, I didn't see 'im go for the gun at all," exclaimed one of the young men in admiration.

"We'll fix your wound up, Clemens, but you're my prisoner for a few hours," Joe told the would-be leader. "And you, Edgars," he said, turning to that awed individual, "are you still for that man?"

"What you says goes, buddie," Edgars answered promptly with a sheepish grin. "I change my nomination for boss to Joe Ballenford."

"And we don't need no vote to settle it," Phil Garten decided for the crowd.

CHAPTER III
Unseen Dangers

By noon that day every detail of the daring night expedition against the outlaw camp had been gone over with care. As Devil Sam's camp was but a four hours' ride away, Joe had decided to set out for it about four o'clock in the afternoon in order that they might have time to go in by a roundabout way and still get there not too late in the night.

The wounded Clemens had not been included in the plans for the undertaking, of course, but he had been given the freedom of the camp. When the time for departure drew near and two of the men started out to wrangle the horses, the single mount in the corral with Homer's horse was found to be missing.

"Where's Clemens?" Joe asked as soon as he was told.

"He was out there under a tree about an hour ago," some one answered.

"Anybody seen 'im since?" Joe demanded.

It was soon clear that the man had given them the slip. It meant but one thing: He had gone to warn Devil Sam of the impending attack. Joe knew that the man, though his wound was not serious, could not ride so very hard. He hoped he might yet overtake the traitor before he could reach the enemy camp.

"Give me Homer's horse," he gnashed. "Phil, the rest of you fellows come on as soon as you can wrangle the horses. If I don't overtake Clemens, we'll have to change our plans. I'll be waitin' for you at the other side of the Narrows, whatever happens."

The last words were called back over his shoulder as Joe vaulted into the saddle and dashed away. Soon he was pushing his horse to its utmost. The trail had been outlined to him so that he was able to keep to it without difficulty.

At the foot of the trail leading over the Narrows, however, he came upon a new problem. Here, instead of finding the tracks of one horse, he saw that several horses had gone up the trail in recent hours. It was almost certain that those other horsemen were Devil Sam men. All Joe could do, though, was to push on and hope that they had been ahead of Clemens.

Just as the anxious Ballenford passed over the crest of the divide and was hurrying along between the huge boulders that lined the trail, here almost level for some distance, two men stepped out squarely in front of him and one at his back.

"Up with the mitts," one of them commanded.

Joe looked the situation over deliberately. He saw that he was trapped and that he would have to make the best of it. Resistance at the moment meant certain death.

"Looks like I'll have to if you say so," he asserted, slowly raising his hands. "What's the idea?"

"You never mind that," said the leader "Take his guns, 'Simp.'"

The man in the rear came up and took Joe's guns. Still unresisting, Joe obeyed the order to dismount and allowed them to bind his hands behind him. But he noted with a slight hope that his horse was standing loose a short distance away. When they had him well secured, the leader turned to Simp again.

"Take 'im back to Clemens," he ordered. "You come back with us. If I ain't mighty mistaken, them other kids 'll be here 'fore long an' we can drop 'em right here in this pass an' be rid of 'em fer good. Ain't never been room fer two camps in this basin noway."

Joe's guard led him something like fifty yards back from the trail and into a clump of scrub oaks behind a pile of giant rocks. On the way the captive's

mind was filled with apprehension for his new allies who were almost certain to ride squarely into the ambush.

As they passed into the clump of trees Joe saw Clemens leering at him from a perch on a stone. The man drew his gun with his left hand as Joe was ushered in. A few steps more brought Joe face to face with Betty Adams, also with her hands behind her back.

"Betty!" he exclaimed, "you here?"

"So it seems," returned Betty with an attempt at cheerfulness.

"How does it happen that——"

A shout from the men on the trail broke in on the question. The voice of the leader called out to Simp to hurry back to help them catch Joe's horse that had made off for home. A brief order was shouted to Clemens to come out and watch the trail while they were gone.

Joe knew that the men would bend every effort to overtake the horse before he got far enough down on the other side to be discovered by the expected enemy. As he saw the hurrying Simp disappear around the rocks he realized that now was the time for Betty and him to make their escape, if ever. With a brandish of his gun, Clemens ordered them to precede him toward the trail. They both marched out ahead of him and halted at his command several paces from the trail.

"Git down here 'hind this rock," Clemens directed, "an' don't fergit I'll have my eyes open every minute. We're goin' t' be sure t' keep both of yuhns—fer different reasons, though," he added with a knowing grin. "My time's come purty quick, ain't it, Ballenford?"

Joe answered the insulting words with tight lips. He saw that Clemens was going to pass close to where they stood. He moved over a few feet so that the bully would walk between him and Betty. Just as he expected, Clemens turned to the girl with some thinly veiled words on his lips. His back was to Joe only for a moment, but it gave him his chance. Quickly he dropped his head and charged after the manner of a driving halfback going through center.

He caught the unwary Clemens below the shoulders and sent him sprawling to the ground. Like a wild bull Joe was upon his enemy, stamping and kicking in desperate fury. Twice Clemens fired, but ineffectively with the left hand. Then a terrible thud of Joe's boot ended the brief fray and Clemens lay limp and unconscious.

To Joe's utter surprise, Betty now ran forward with her hands free. Quickly at his instructions she snatched out his pocket-knife and began to sever his bonds.

"Cut it only in one place," he cautioned. "I want the rawhide to hog-tie this coyote. How does it happen that you weren't tied" he asked as he swiftly bound the hands and feet of the unconscious Clemens.

"I was," the fearless Betty replied, "but my hands and wrists are very supple and I had worked them loose by the time you got there. I was only waiting for a chance to do something."

"But what're you doin' over here anyway?"

"Those men caught me over on the other side. I rode over to your ranch to tell your men what had become of you. On the way back they surprised me and had me tied before I hardly knew what was happening. I gathered from their talk that they have had a standing order from Devil Sam to capture me if ever they got the chance."

"Will your dad have any idea of what has become of you?"

"He probably won't miss me before night. I'm often gone all day."

During this time Joe had carried Clemens back behind a rock and armed himself with his two guns. He then found the man's horse and took a rope and some rawhide from the saddle.

"You take this horse," he said to Betty with concern in his voice, "and strike out for home. You can ride up over the ridge back there and cut down across to the Blacktail Pass trail some

miles below here. It'll be rough but it's the only safe way."

"And leave you here to fight it alone?" Betty asked, scornfully.

"Of course. You couldn't take a hand in the coming scrap and the farther you are away the better I'll be satisfied."

"Didn't I come in pretty handy just now? I'm here to stay with you."

Joe saw that argument would not prevail, and he had no time to lose. "All right, then," he agreed. "Guess I'll take a chance on your gun eye. Let's go out here a little ways and wait. I can't kill a man from behind a rock," he planned aloud, "and neither can we take a chance on holding up these three men.

"They might be desperate enough to begin fireworks in the face of my two guns. We'll just wing all three of 'em before they know what's happened, then take 'em prisoners. I'll take the two first and you can break the rear one's arm at the same time."

CHAPTER IV
The Dawn of Truth

A FEW minutes later the couple lay on top of a rock at the crest of the divide, their eyes barely peering over the edge to give them a view of the three hundred yards of trail in sight down toward the Little Miguel. They had selected a convenient rock in their rear to which Betty would drop back for the ambush and a scrubby cedar for Joe's hiding place, when the enemy was sighted.

It was but a short time until they saw a horseman come in sight. Betty began to slide backward off the rock, but Joe detained her. "Wait a minute," he said. "Let's see how things look first."

So far they had seen but one rider. The man came on toward them until not a hundred yards away. Still no others were in sight.

"Easier than we expected," Joe whispered. "We'll herd this one in before the others get back. Come on."

They wriggled down off the rock and back to the cedar bush. The lone rider came in sight over the crest of the divide and rode on with careless unconcern. Just before he got opposite the cedar tree Joe raised up with two guns covering him.

"Stick 'em up," he ordered quietly.

The trapped outlaw attempted to play for time.

"Where'd you come from?" he asked with surprise he did not have to feign.

"Shoot your hands up," Joe retorted, "or I'll kill you in less than five seconds."

The man read meaning in the cold words. Slowly his hands went upward. Betty sprang from her hiding place and took his guns. While the captive was yet on the horse Joe quickly bound his hands behind him, then jerked him off the horse, stuffed his mouth with a part of his shirt and rushed him off behind a rock.

When Joe returned to the trail and once more crept up to the lookout rock, he saw another rider already half way up from the curve, leading the retrieved horse, and the third just rounding into sight. This presented a more difficult problem.

The men were too close together to take them separately and too far apart to hold them up at the same time. He did not dare risk to Betty the task of taking one of them, even though she would have the drop on him. The ruffian might be too quick on the draw for her inexperienced hands.

At that moment Joe remembered the rope he had taken the precaution to bring along. Just then the man in the rear halted and looked back. More than likely he was keeping a watch for the expected appearance of Homer's men. Anyway it showed that he was in no hurry. The forward man was still riding along leisurely.

Again crouched in their hiding places, the couple waited. On came the rustler over the divide. Joe allowed him to get by a few paces, then with a sure hand sent the rope flying through the air and

brought it down over the head of the unsuspecting horseman. Before the man could recover from his utter surprise he was snatched backward from his horse, his arms pinned to his sides.

He hit the ground with a thud and had no more than landed when a blow from the butt of Joe's gun knocked him senseless. Without the loss of a second Joe seized an arm and ran, dragging his victim to the shelter of a rock. Betty followed with the horse and stood guard over the new prisoner, lest he should recover at once, while Joe returned to receive the last of the trio.

But this task was not so easy as it had promised to be. The rustler had scarcely come over the top of the trail before he halted and looked searchingly toward the spot where Betty had led the last man's horse. The young rancher realized that she had not succeeded in entirely concealing the animal and he now feared that the man, suspecting danger, would wheel his horse and escape before he could bring him down, for he was yet forty yards away.

The fellow's hand rested on the butt of his gun while he puzzled over the horse. To take the least chance of letting him get away, Joe suddenly sprang from his hiding place, gun leveled, and started running toward the desperado.

As he fully expected, the latter jerked his gun with instant decision to fight. But, having a slight advantage, Joe got in the first shot and his bullet found its mark. The man wilted forward in the saddle but managed to fire twice before the gun dropped from his hand. His bullets went wild, however, and the unharmed cowman eased him to the ground.

"Yuh got me that time, Ballenford," said the dying man, "but your time's comin'. Don't fergit Devil Sam's on his way. An' he won't fergit—what—you've done—to—me."

"Sorry, buddie," Joe replied with genuine regret, "but you made me do it. Maybe it *will* be my turn next."

Joe's next problem was to induce Betty to take the homeward trail. Although night was no more than two hours away, a full moon up soon after dark would help her keep her bearings and there was little danger in that direction now.

"But what are you going to do?" Betty demanded at his first suggestion. "Can't we take these men and go back together? Three is enough at one time."

Joe did not know what to reply at first. He had not told her of Homer's gang of men, nor did he want to. "I'm goin' to pay Devil Sam a visit," he answered, finally.

Betty gazed at him a moment before replying. There was the same look on her face that had been there the day before when she stood debating whether to allow Slim and Amos to ride away with him or not.

"Let's be honest, Joe," she said at last. "I know by the horse you were riding that you've seen Homer, and you must know what he's doing. He came to see me last night. I begged him to give it up and he almost agreed. Maybe you can put him straight again, or have already. What's Homer go to do with 'getting' Devil Sam?"

"I have seen Homer," Joe now confessed sorrowfully, "and he had decided to quit when—when——" He suddenly checked himself.

"When what?" Betty demanded, quickly.

"It's enough for you to know he's through rustlin', isn't it" Joe tried to evade.

"No, what happened to Homer?"

"Betty, I guess I'll have to tell you. Homer—is—dead."

"Oh, Joe, I'm sorry—so sorry. What happened?"

Had Joe been less moved by the sad recital that he supposed would crush the girl, he might have caught in her voice, filled with regret and quick sorrow, more of sympathy and condolence to him than of personal loss. But he interpreted the tears welling up in her eyes as a repres-

sion of the great grief she must have felt.

"How did it happen?" Betty repeated.

"On his way back from his visit to you he was snakebit. Before he died he told me of your love and his dyin' wish was that he could live to come clean and go back to marry you."

"But, Joe, I did not—poor Homer, he surely did not——"

She was yet struggling for words to correct his error when a shout interrupted her. Homer's men had arrived. They rode down in a hurry, sorry they had been detained in wrangling the horses with no mount for the task.

"These are Homer's men," Joe told Betty. "If he had lived, he would be leadin' them in this roundin' up of Devil Sam and his cut-throats. But since he can't, I'm goin' to do it for 'im. We'd better be ridin', too, for we've got a long trip ahead. You had better——"

"I'm going with you," Betty declared, with determination.

Thereupon ensued a heated argument. Betty finally had to yield to the unbending will of the young cowman.

"Good luck to you," she smiled, in surrender. "I'll be looking for you when you come back—with Devil Sam a prisoner and—proof aplenty that you're no cattle thief."

With a look into his eyes that sent a thrill through Joe's heart, she gave him her hand a moment, then turned to her horse and was gone without another word.

CHAPTER V
Red Hot Muzzles

Joe soon explained to his elated men what had happened already. "But," he said shortly, "looks like we'll have to change our plans a little. I think from what that fellow said as he was dyin' that Devil Sam is comin' through this pass before long."

"Let's wait here a little while and see," suggested Phil Garten. "We've got a fair view of the trail down that way. Here'd be a good place to say howdy to 'em."

"You're darn right," exclaimed the now thoroughly converted Hump Edgars. "Clemens, you just picked the wrong outfit, that's all."

A few minutes later the man on lookout called out that a party of horsemen was in sight. Everybody strained their eyes on the Big Miguel trail. Coming in their direction at a slow trot was a scattered group of riders. "That's Devil Sam's outfit," Phil decided at once. "Nine of 'em. That's his whole shebang. Most likely they'd planned to meet these others and give us a hot time tonight."

With little more ado the horses were concealed in the place where Joe had first found Betty. Joe next selected a point of ambush a little nearer to the approaching enemy. Each man was assigned a place at an interval of about seven paces, thus preparing to cover the cavalcade which would have to ride through here single file. Joe himself took the place at the head of the line so that he would be in a position to confront the leader.

It was more than half an hour before the first man came into sight down the trail. Immediately Joe recognized the giant, shaggy-bearded leader as Devil Sam. While he was slouched in his saddle, there was yet a cunning alertness about the huge rustler. But without discovering the ambush, he came on until almost opposite Joe. The latter suddenly showed the upper portion of his body over the top of a rock and shouted, "Mitts up. I've got every one of you covered."

"Is that so?" the outlaw leader inquired, sneeringly, complying not at all with the demand.

"Make a move for your guns," Joe warned, "and we'll shoot to kill. Put your hands up, I say."

Despite the imperative ring in Joe's voice, Devil Sam turned slightly in his

saddle and spoke a low word to the man nearest him, who in turn passed it back. Joe became angered at the insolent delay in heeding his repeated order to surrender.

"I'll count five," he said in bold determination, "and then my men will shoot down every man who has not got his paws in the air."

"Just a minute," Devil Sam parleyed. "What terms will you give if we surrender?"

"No damn terms," Joe returned hotly. "One—two—three—fo——"

Suddenly the halted line became electrified with action. Every man of them whipped out his gun and spurred his horse at the same time. Joe, taken aback at the sudden daring move, missed his best chance to drop Devil Sam at the first break. Likewise, his men did not get in the deadly shots they might have made.

Devil Sam and three others plunged forward, bent low on the necks of their horses and trying to keep their retreat covered by firing. Two of the desperadoes crumpled from their saddles at the first volley and the third went down a moment later as he tried to dash by Joe's end of the line.

Still a fourth was plucked off as he wheeled his horse and attempted to follow another who had already made his escape in the direction from which they had come. But Devil Sam and the three after him managed to get out of sight with no apparent injuries.

Mad with disappointment, Joe shouted to his men to rush for their horses and give chase to the four flying down into Little Miguel Basin. The horses were fully two hundred yards distant and off the trail somewhat. That meant a serious delay, but the eager men darted away for the mounts.

Joe had started running with them when a big bald-faced horse of the enemy, having lost his rider, deserted his temporary refuge of the opposite side of the trail and came tearing along in pursuit of his mates.

With a running start as the animal came dashing by, Joe managed to catch on to the horn of the saddle and swing himself onto the animal's back. Another shout of command to his men and he disappeared down the trail, not three hundred yards behind the flying rustlers.

Down the winding trail he plunged in reckless disregard of his neck. But urge him as he would, Joe could not make those sharp turns with the larger horse as swiftly as the four wiry buckskins carrying the outlaws. The distance between them gradually lengthened. But of one thing Joe became convinced; the fleeing men mistook him for the original rider of the horse. Once one of them turned in his saddle and tried to shout something to him.

They had covered fully two miles before the trail straightened out into a long stretch unbroken by hills or arroyos and gave Joe's superior horse a chance to lessen considerably the distance between him and the pursued. Then it was that the brave cowman saw something that sent a chill of fear to his heart.

In spite of the fact that he believed her well out of danger by this time, he now saw Betty racing ahead of the outlaws. He knew at once that, alone on the trail, the girl had debated again the question of seeking safety over the mountain or returning to join her friends for the revenge that she longed to see meted out to her late captors. And this was the fearful predicament to which her willful decision had brought her.

With renewed frenzy Joe prodded his gallant horse to its utmost and kept gaining ground. Then several quick glances backward from the enemy told him that they had discovered their mistake as to his identity. Presently the three of them slowed down while Devil Sam kept on in what Joe knew to be actual pursuit of the girl. Betty was lashing her little mount to its greatest effort, but the burly ruffian kept gaining on her.

All at once the three men in the rear swerved from the trail, one going on one side and two on the other. Joe saw instantly that they meant to stop him or cut him down between a crossfire from their guns. Giving his horse free rein ahead, he snatched out both of his guns and opened fire as soon as he came within range. This had the desired effect of forcing the men back to a longer range.

When he came within the real danger zone of their fire, Joe suddenly dropped down on the neck of his horse and sped on between his enemies. Bullets spattered around him; one burnt its way across his shoulder, another bit his leg and embedded itself in the saddle, while he feared still another had hit his horse somewhere. But he ran the gauntlet and flew on in hot pursuit of Devil Sam and Betty.

Much to his relief, he saw in a backward glance that the three men, evidently believing Devil Sam could take care of himself, were preparing to make a stand against Joe's oncoming men. Yet three hundred yards remained between Joe and Devil Sam, while the latter was no more than twenty behind Betty.

Joe saw her turn in her saddle and fire backward twice. Then the huge outlaw shot up beside her, leaned out, snatched the girl from her horse, and kept on his daring way. Not until he looked back again did the rustler seem to be aware of the fact that his men had not been successful in their assigned task of stopping the intrepid Joe. He evinced some concern at the rapid gains Joe's mount was making on his own horse with its double burden.

AS soon as Joe came within range Devil Sam began to turn in his saddle and fire. For fear of hitting Betty, Joe dared not return the fire in earnest, but he sent bullets whizzing near Bragg's ears every time he turned, so that he kept the man's aim poorer than it already was by his having to hold on to Betty.

Joe exulted to see the distance between them lessen to fifty yards. He wondered why the man did not wheel his horse and, with Betty as a protection, shoot it out with him. Then he saw the reason. The horse, with his head thrust forward and the reins swinging to the ground, was beyond his master's control, dashing away as madly as its burden would permit.

Joe did not know until Betty explained later that as she was transferred to Devil Sam's mount she threw the reins over its head, thinking the animal would stop. But with a flesh wound from her gun stinging it on to panic, the horse made the most of its runaway flight.

Joe was already in so close that he could have killed Devil Sam with a single shot, but he feared the man would drag Betty off with him to the peril of her life. So, riding low to avoid a chance lucky shot from Devil Sam's gun, he bided his time a moment. Then he took deliberate aim at the man's right upper arm. The gun cracked and Devil Sam's gun dropped from his hand.

Then Joe spurted forward. Coming in alongside the villain, he leaned out and caught Betty's arm with his left hand to protect her from a possible fall. His right hand shot upward with his clubbed gun and came down with a crash on the back of the bristling head. Twice more the gun butt rose and fell and Devil Sam plunged from the saddle. As he went down Joe lifted Betty across to his own horse.

The girl was still unconscious, blue marks at her throat. Joe had seen her fight desperately when first taken, so no doubt Devil Sam had strangled her into insensibility in order that he might devote himself to his pursuer. Joe drew up his horse and dismounted to rest Betty on the ground. As he was placing his big hat under her head for a pillow she opened her eyes, felt at her throat and gasped. Very quickly then consciousness returned.

At the first assurance that she was all right, Joe turned to see how his friends were faring. The three outlaws, evidently thinking they had the advantage in numbers, had stood to give battle to the two of Joe's men who had been able to reach their horses quickly and follow close behind Joe. They still had the youngsters at bay when the three late comers loomed in sight. Just at this point, too, Joe left Betty and raced away to join in the clean-up.

At sight of the reinforcements from both sides, the rustlers turned and fled with the two youths at their heels. They bore off to the right side of the basin, so that by dint of hard racing Joe was able to come alongside them.

For more than half a mile he ran almost neck to neck with the outer of the cattle thieves and at such a close range that they exchanged frequent shots. By this time all five of Homer's men were pressing hard on the heels of the trio.

Hump Edgars' horse went down in a heap and the little turn-coat was thrown to the ground and left senseless behind. Then one of the rustlers halted his horse and threw up one of his hands, the other gripping at a bad wound in his side. Soon after a bullet from the gun of Joe's antagonist struck a rib and ripped across Joe's deep chest.

Paying no heed to the wound, he rushed in closer and sent the man tumbling from his horse with a bullet through his head. Only one outlaw was left. It did not take long for Joe's powerful horse to circle in ahead of him and block his way. Seeing certain death awaiting him if he kept up the fight, the man threw up his hands and put an end to the chase.

CHAPTER VI
Not Much On Courtin'

It was a busy set of men for a time that night as they rounded up their prisoners at a temporary camp by a spring of fresh water. One man was sent back to Homer's camp for a supply of food. Betty's skillful hand was put to use in dressing the wounded.

Very reluctantly Joe submitted his wounds to her care. The leg wound proved to be little more than a mere nip, but the long gash across his chest, while not disabling, required serious attention. Betty washed away the clotted blood and tried to bandage the chest wound with a piece of intimate garment washed and sterilized before the fire.

As she worked there came to Joe the same overpowering charm of her presence that had mastered him when she rested in his arms after her rescue from Devil Sam. As soon as she pronounced her work complete he managed to get away from her and thereafter strove to avoid her as much as possible.

It was a strange procession that moved up over the mountain the next morning, wended on through Blacktail Pass and down into the cattle country. One group of would-have-been bad men had under convoy half of the gang of real desperadoes. The other half of this gang had found shallow graves back there in the basin; all but the one that had gained temporary safety in his flight into the Big Miguel during the battle of the preceding day.

Now on this man's trail was the iron-willed young cowman who had been accused of being in league with the rustlers. He had gone on after the last man in spite of the entreaties of all his friends to let the one individual, who was certain to make tracks for a healthier country, go his way unpursued. Joe was not alone, however. By his side rode the recovered Hump Edgars in all the exultation of his young hero-worshipping soul.

The convoy in charge of Phil Garten was first met on the other side by one of the Bar-Y riders who, with neighboring cowmen, were scouring the country for traces of Betty.

"Poor dad," said Betty when she had

heard the puncher's story, "he'll never let me get out of his sight again. What's he been saying, Bill?"

The puncher grinned. He was not of the overly backward kind, this Bill.

"I got it purty straight," he drawled, "that he's been afraid you run away with one or 'tother of them Ballenford boys."

Poor Betty's face went scarlet. When she failed to frown away Bill's grin, she turned her head in confusion. Bill coughed to cover his embarrassment at the realization of his audacious remark. The rest of the party thought it was time to move forward again.

Three months later old Bead Adams was having a quiet chat with an old cronie who had come to visit him.

"Yeah," he related. "Joe's got a fine herd started over there in the Miguel, Andy, and a bunch of young punchers that'd go through hell for 'em.

"No, sir, no more gangs drivin' off half a herd at a time. Joe cleaned out that dirty outfit all in one day, 'cept one stray that he come draggin' in four days later. Ever hear about that? Course you have, though, if you've been visitin' over in the next county.

"Come blamed nigh hangin' my own son-in-law to start off with, but how's I to know? Guess I was about as foolish in that as Joe was about Betty afterwards. You know he come home from that chase after that one rustler that got away, with an outlandish fever from the wound across his bosom, and he was all tuckered out gen'rly. Betty's got a head of 'er own, you know, and she just takes 'im in here and nurses 'im through it and puts 'im on his feet again.

"I don't mean no harm by this, 'cause I think the world and all of Joe, but I guess he ain't got much more sense than a wooly-faced burro when it comes to courtin'. After Betty fixin' 'im up and straightenin' 'im out again and all, he still was thinkin' she was doin' it for the sake of that onery brother of his that started all the fireworks.

"And the Lord only knows how long it would've gone on if I hadn't seen how things was goin' and took a hand. But that's just 'tween you and me, Andy, for they still don't know how I managed to wake Joe up to what was what with Betty.

"Mighty fine boy, though, if he ain't much on courtin'."

Crossed Trails

By Lee Willenborg

Northwest—Jacques Morette, halfbreed, bares a thoroughbred heart to a man and woman

NOTHING marred the intense quiet of the wilderness but the crackle of the birch-wood fire. Dave Murdock, his feet pointed toward the friendly glow, lounged gratefully in the heat. On the opposite side of the fire, absorbed in an ancient copy of the *Police Gazette,* left by some sporty transient, sat Jacques Morette.

Now and then, he would shrug his shoulders, or his lips would part in a smile, showing his faultless teeth. But Dave paid no attention. It had been a hard day; the first day in camp is likely to be just that. But now, the rude cabin alight with the cheering open fire; the air, full of the scent of fresh pine-needles; and the bodily weariness incident to a strenuous day brought a drowsy peace.

"Some one come," said Jacques quietly, though Dave had heard no sound but the sputter of the flames.

An instant later, a hail came through the chill wilderness air.

"Helloo! The cabin!"

Dave opened the door and peered into the gloom.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Corporal Hall, of the Mounted."

At this announcement, Jacques shrugged and remarked:

"So."

Then he returned to his perusal of the fascinating *Police Gazette.*

Dave watched the corporal come out of the darkness into the ruddy glow of the fire. He closed the door after his guest entered, and stood for a moment with his back to it.

"Hello, Jack."

The corporal seemed surprised to see the gambler.

"Good evening," Jacques answered, without so much as an upward glance. Hall held his hands toward the fire.

"Devilish cold tonight," he said.

"How did you come?" Jacques in-

quired, fixing the corporal with his sharp eyes.

"Canoe from St. M—; saw your light; expected to stop here over night anyway."

He turned toward Murdock expectantly.

"You go far, yes?" asked Jacques.

"H'm, that's a question," said Hall. "I go till I catch what I'm after, eh, Jack?"

"Mebbe so; mebbe not," the half-breed answered, stoically.

"Encouraging chap, isn't he?" asked the corporal with a wink toward Murdock.

Dave forced a smile.

"He's a good guide," he said.

"None better," agreed Hall promptly. He favored Murdock with a long stare. Then he said: "Since I'm here, I'll have a look at your huntin' and fishin' permits, Mr. —; I didn't quite get your name."

"Here," said Jacques, digging into an inside pocket of his waist-coat.

It seemed to Murdock that this corporal took a great deal of unnecessary time inspecting the permits. Jacques flashed Murdock a look, and laid a forefinger over his lips.

"Seems regular, all right," said Hall, handing the permits to Murdock. "Funny you let your guide carry 'em, what?"

"That is a matter upon which there might be more than one opinion, Corporal," said Dave stiffly.

"Of course," answered Hall, "yours and mine. Well, I've noticed the Northwest Mounted has opinions and they usually carry, if you get what I mean."

"Perfectly," Dave replied. "I've met any number of the Northwest Mounted chaps. You are the first uncivil one I've encountered."

Jacques smiled.

"You stop here all night, then?" he asked in a matter-of-fact tone.

Hall conquered a scowl and smiled.

"I'll get my sleepin' bag."

He turned to Murdock.

"No offense, Mr. Murdock?" he asked with a nasty inflection on the name.

"You know the unwritten wilderness law of 'food-and-shelter,' I suppose," Dave answered.

Hall went out without a word and closed the cabin-door behind him.

Murdock turned to Jacques, but the half-breed raised his hand and shook his head quickly. Then he crossed to the door and flung it open. Hall, standing less than two paces away, swung like a flash and started down the trail. But Dave and Jacques both caught the movement.

"We leave the door open," said Jacques in a smooth tone. "Mebbe you see the trail better, eh?"

By the time the corporal returned, Jacques was again absorbed in the *Police Gazette*. Dave poked up the fire and lighted a cigaret.

"He's a rare 'un," said Hall, jerking his head in the direction of the half-breed.

Dave was in no mood for conversation. This conceited corporal annoyed him. He said nothing in reply.

For a long time, Dave Murdock lay awake in his bunk. The fire had burned low. In his restlessness, he finally rose and went out of the cabin. He took a deep breath of the chill, balsam-scented air. But he did not complete the inhalation. There, on the opposite bluff, glowed a tiny flickering fire!

What was the meaning of that fire among the trees across the river? Only one thing—more pursuers. Looking back at each futile move he had made in his supposed escape, he wondered if there was anything he had overlooked that would have made his flight easier to follow.

He had signed his own name to the wire he had sent Jacques; the guide had taken out the hunting and fishing license in Murdock's name. He cursed bitterly. Somewhere out in the lonely wilderness a wolf howled. It was gray

in the east before he fell into a fitful, uneasy sleep.

IT was broad daylight when he awoke. Jacques was leaning against the door-jamb, and looking out across the river where Murdock had seen the camp-fire the night before. Corporal Hall was not in sight. His sleeping bag had disappeared. Dave came to the door.

"The corporal?" he asked.

"He go early—up river," Jacques answered.

"Didn't go across to that bluff?" Dave questioned, pointing to the spot.

"No."

"There was some one there last night," said Dave. "I saw their camp-fire."

Jacques turned without reply, and busied himself getting breakfast.

While the half-breed washed dishes, Dave sat on a log smoking moodily. Several times, he turned toward Jacques and each time checked the impulse to speak.

Finally he said:

"I had some trouble just before I came up here," watching the guide narrowly. Seeing no trace of any expression in the half-breed's features, he added: "I thought you should know about it."

Jacques threw out the dish-water with a flourish, and hung the pan on a peg in the cabin wall.

"I have seen some droll things, yes," he said. "Trouble, come to all of us. You catch man tryin' take your woman —woosh! That makes the blood run fast, eh? You kill him; that is right. But law say no. Law is a damn fool sometime, eh?"

They made their way to the knoll where Dave had seen the fire. The ashes of it, still warm, and a bed of pine-needles where the wayfarer had slept. There were footprints of moccasin-clad feet; and in one spot a deep imprint of a high-heeled shoe.

"Woman," said Jacques, squatting over the mark. "Tenderfoot," he added. "Wear dance shoes."

They found the keel-mark of a canoe in the mud at the foot of the bluff, and more footprints. Jacques examined them carefully.

"Four, mebbe five, hours old," he said. "They start before daylight."

Nearer civilization, where hunting and fishing clubs were plentiful, these evidences of travelers would have meant nothing. Here, in the almost trackless wilderness, it might mean anything.

For three days, Jacques and Dave scoured the surrounding country, without finding a trace of a human.

"One more place," said the half-breed as they sat before the cabin the third night.

A great, brassy full moon was pushing up over the spiky tops of the hemlocks, and bathing the rude cabin in a queer, unearthly glow.

"Old Labideaux has a cabin up Lost Creek. He die last winter. Mebbe some one there, eh?"

"How far is it?"

"From here, forty miles," answered Jacques. "Lots of fast water, portage damn bad. Two days."

"We start tomorrow," said Dave tersely.

"Why do you go?" demanded the half-breed.

Dave had no answer for that. If old Labideaux's cabin were sheltering police, the more miles between them the better. If they were fugitives—like himself—they were better left alone. A queer, unreasonable urge seemed to force him onward. He fought it; but it conquered him.

CHAPTER II
Confidences of the Trail

THE trip was all Jacques had said of it. Miles of rough water; steep, rocky portages, choked with wind-falls and underbrush. But the weather held fine, and in spite of the handicaps they had made good time. A mile above Labi-

deaux's cabin, they beached the canoe, and hid it in the underbrush. It was a long, hard mile, that last one. From the shoulder of a scrub-covered bluff, they looked across an upland meadow, dotted with blackened stubs, the melancholy remnant of a one-time forest fire. The cabin stood beyond in a small clearing.

"Some one there," whispered Jacques, pointing with a forefinger at the blue thread of smoke rising straight from the cabin chimney.

Dave nodded. It was very still. The dark, brooding forest behind the cabin seemed carved out of wood. Something besides a fire was in the cabin; voices —faint yet audible—came to the crouching figures on the shoulder of the bluff. Then the door of the cabin opened. A figure stepped out and paused in the door-way; it was Corporal Hall.

Murdock felt a hand grip his sleeve and pull him down behind a boulder.

"That Hall has good eyes," said Jacques, with a shrug.

"We'd best get back to our canoe," Dave said, and, suiting the action to the word, he started off down the bluff, Jacques following a few paces behind.

Half way down, a rattle of underbrush stopped them. Below them some hundred yards, they saw Corporal Hall swing across an open glade and disappear toward the river. For a half hour, they waited; heard the corporal launch his canoe; waited until the last tiniest sound of his going ceased.

"Better we make camp now," said Jacques, with a glance at the sun, scarce a half hour high.

Supper was over.

"What makes you say Hall is a bad one?" Dave asked.

Jacques shrugged.

"It is three years ago," said Jacques, after a moment's thought, "at McNiel's Hall; young McNiel and three others play at poker. Young McNiel is drunk. Hall cheated, twice. Well, it is none of my business. But a third time and McNiel catch him.

" 'You cheated, you dirty swine!' he say.

"Hall reached for his gun, but old man McNiel knock his gun hand down. I smile at Hall; young McNiel is but a hot-headed boy.

" 'What you grinning at, half-breed?' Hall says.

" 'The boy was wrong,' I answer; 'You cheat not once—three times.' "

There is hate in his eyes, sure. But he did not draw his gun thees time.

"Well, two weeks pass, and young McNiel is shot from ambush. It was awkward for Hall, because when he stepped from his hiding place, he is almost near enough that I might touch him. I keep ver' still. At last, he sees me; his face went a little white, yes.

" 'Well?' he asked.

" 'If thees boy dies, it means the halter for you, eh?'

" 'Not unless you squeal.'

" 'Jacques Morette does not squeal; he has his code, yes,' I answer; 'If the boy dies, you give yourself up or I will see to it that you live not overlong.'

"But the boy gets well; and so there is a truce."

"What's to stop him from potting *you* from ambush?" Dave asked.

Jacques shrugged.

"The night he come to the cabin," he said, "I read thees *Police Gazette*. Well, there was a piece in it about a 'Kid Garvin.' I cut it out and slipped it in Corporal Hall's hat. So. It would be of interest to him perhaps."

"So he is Kid Garvin?"

Jacques nodded, and ran his tongue over his lips.

For the first time in weeks, Dave slept soundly. He awoke, fresh and keen. Jacques was busy with breakfast. A tiny, almost smokeless fire burned briskly under the coffee pot. Even so small a fire seemed a risk to Dave after Hall had come upon them out of the night.

The cabin had seemed so safe that even Jacques, cautious and furtive, regarded the chance of discovery as very

faint. But the corporal had found them just the same. Dave would remember the first few minutes of that officer's visit for a long, long time.

In a spirit of restlessness, Dave climbed the bluff overlooking Labideaux's cabin. As he looked across the clearing, he discovered a man standing in the open doorway. Whether the man saw him or not, he could not be sure. But a moment later, the man turned and disappeared within the cabin, only to re-appear a few seconds later armed with a rifle.

He bore off to the left, without a glance in Dave's direction, and finally disappeared in the deep wood beyond the cabin. From what Jacques had told him of Hall, Dave was inclined to hold the corporal's friends in small esteem. But was this lean, sickly-looking man a friend of Hall's?

And what was he doing with the rifle? Dave could only make guesses. He moved slowly down the bluff; stopped at a wind-fall, and sat down upon it. As he sat there, thoughtfully considering the unfortunate position he had got himself into, a white object beside the wind-fall caught his eye. He picked it up. A woman's kerchief with "J. C." embroidered in one corner.

"She probably belongs in the cabin with the chap who just left with a rifle under his arm," he mused.

For some reason, he felt distinctly relieved. These were probably wayfarers who were innocent enough. At all events, they were hardly hunting *him*. He lit his pipe, and smoked thoughtfully. It was very still on this shoulder of the bluff; so still that Dave would have heard the snapping of a twig had he not been so absorbed in his own thoughts.

Suddenly, a shot rang out, and a bullet cut past his head and spent itself with a spiteful "Ping" in a tree trunk beyond him. Dave fell forward and rolled back, crowding against the wind-fall. He could hear some one coming through the underbrush, and also the light, faint patter of moccasin-clad feet running up the rough pathway toward the bluff.

He rolled over on his face and sprawled out. In a few minutes, which seemed an age, he heard heavy breathing as of some one who had been running to their limit. The light footfalls and snapping of underbrush had ceased. Then a voice, hoarse and throaty:

"Who are you?"

Dave rolled over and faced his near-murderer; it was the man whom he had seen leave the cabin with the rifle.

"I'm not hit," said Dave getting to his feet. "No thanks to you however."

A cruel look came into the man's face; he gripped the rifle across his right hip.

"Are you connected with the police?" he snarled. "The truth now, or I'll shoot you where you stand,"

Dave forced a laugh.

"Nothing like it," he said. "I'm about as far from a policeman as it's possible to get."

The man relaxed a trifle; but the rifle was held at the same deadly angle.

"I'm not so sure," said he.

Dave raised both hands above his head; behind this half-crazed man stood Jacques. His were the footfalls Dave had heard when he lay behind the wind-fall.

Dave said:

"Well, I'm helpless; what do you want me to do?"

The man started to answer; a paroxysm of coughing seized him. As he bent over, Jacques leaped toward him. In a flash, the rifle was torn from his grasp. The man sank to his knees; blood-flecked foam came from his mouth; and his slight frame shook with exhaustion. In a moment, he recovered and staggered to his feet. He stood swaying uncertainly; Dave slipped an arm under his shoulder.

"Lend a hand," he said to Jacques.

Slowly they made their way to the Labideaux cabin. As they neared the

door, the figure came round the corner of the cabin.

"You!" exclaimed Dave in astonishment.

But the girl paid no attention.

"Father!" she cried.

They got him into the cabin and a moment later Dave joined Jacques, who had remained outside.

"You know that girl, eh?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Dave briefly.

A half hour went by, and then the girl came to the door.

"He is easier now," she said to Dave. "He wants to speak to you."

"I want to apologize," said the sick man in a thin voice. "I thought you might be one of Corporal Hall's friends, damn him!"

Dave caught the grim humor of the apology, but said quietly:

"That's all right; no harm done."

"I'm done for," went on the querulous voice from the semi-gloom of the rude bunk. "I might have got away with it, but even so I'd never found any peace of mind. How Hall found out my secret is a mystery; but he did it. He'll never take me alive, though, never."

A fit of coughing seized him. The girl, who was at the foot of the bunk, came to him and raised him up. At a nod from her, Dave quit the cabin. Jacques lounged on the bench.

"Go back to camp and pack the duffle, put it in the canoe and bring it down," said Dave. "We camp here tonight."

He sat down on the bench, and idly watched the half-breed swing off across the clearing. In a few minutes, the girl came to the door. Dave looked up but she shook her head, cautioning silence.

"He's asleep now," she said in a whisper. "I think he is really better."

She moved down the path a few paces and Dave followed her.

"Well?" she challenged when he came alongside. "Ask it if you like; but I won't guarantee to answer."

"There's only one thing I have any right to ask," said Dave. "Do you remember a certain raw day last Spring in front of the Bachelors' Club?"

"No," she said, "I don't know of any such club."

For a moment, Dave regarded her gravely. She had frank, honest eyes; it seemed hard to believe that she would lie. He was not analytical; but he sensed the fact that she was not lying for herself.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Joan," she said briefly.

"Mine is Dave," he answered, "and I haven't any more questions to ask. You're a plucky girl, Joan."

"Please," she said eagerly, "I don't deserve consideration; because I lied to you just now. I did go to the Bachelors' Club. I thought maybe some one there, who was not—not quite a gentleman—might ask me to eat. I was hungry."

Her voice trembled a little.

"Was that after your father——" Dave began.

She nodded.

"And you fainted on the sidewalk because you were hungry?" he went on.

"How did you know?" she asked, surprised.

"Because I lifted you into a taxi and took you to a hospital," said Dave quietly.

"Oh! I didn't know," Joan said.

A smile flashed in her face for a second, and she was gone.

"Don't think me ungrateful," she said.

Again the quick smile. She held her hand toward him.

"I think I'm not quite myself," she said.

"It's all right," he answered soberly, and released her hand.

Whatever she had done, she had pluck; he was fair-minded enough to admit that. He recalled her graceful movements, her charm, her gentleness.

"None of that," he growled. This girl craved friendship, which was natural enough, especially in the wilderness where the scarcity of human companion-

ship starves the heart. She had had some awkward hours with the world. How far was she to blame? He marvelled at his interest in these people; they were plainly crooks. And he had his own complications with the law to face. He swore under his breath. "I'm just a plain damn fool!"

CHAPTER III

Northwoods—and Compensation

It was noon when Jacques came back. They hid the canoe in a thicket.

As often as Dave went back in his mind to pick up some plan for himself, just that often the mystery about Joan and her father protruded itself.

"Jacques," he said finally, "if Hall has something on that old man in the cabin, why doesn't he gather him in?"

Jacques' teeth flashed in a smile.

"Well, M'sieu, who shall say?" he asked in turn.

They made a temporary camp some two hundred yards from the cabin, and late in the afternoon a hail from Joan brought them up standing. They ran to meet her.

"Father is bad," she cried breathlessly as she neared them. "Will you come?"

"Of course," Dave answered as they ran toward the cabin.

"Has he been bad very long?" he asked.

"Only a few minutes," Joan answered. "He is conscious, but so cold."

The sick man turned feverish eyes toward them as they entered. Joan bent over him, gathering the wasted form in her arms.

"Daddy," she said, "what is it?"

Dave took his flask from his pocket, but the invalid motioned it away with a weak and skinny hand.

"I'm done for," he quavered, in a voice of self-pity. With an effort, he sat up. He said: "At base of jack—" Stiffly he clawed at the neckband of his shirt; there was a gurgling sound in his throat. He sank back. After a moment, he whispered hoarsely: "Jack-pine."

Joan held him and called endearing names; tears stood in her eyes and trickled down her cheeks. It was very still in the cabin, except for the breathing of the dying man. Somewhere in a nearby tree, a verie uttered his sweet, plaintive call. There was a deep breath that ended in a rattling gurgle. The man was dead. As Dave stood in the doorway, a long-forgotten sentence came to him:

"Wicked indeed is the man whose death no woman mourns."

It was late in the afternoon when Joan came out of the cabin. She was white and drawn. Dave rose from the rude bench beside the cabin wall.

"Tomorrow," she said in a tired voice, "we will bury him at the base of the jack-pine; he wished it so."

Dave nodded.

"I'll see to it," he said. Then, after a second, he asked: "Don't you think you might get some rest?"

"That will come—in time," she answered. "But I must tell you something. Maybe I shouldn't tell, though it seems I must go mad if I do not tell some one. I shall have a good deal to face after——" She could not finish.

Dave stood, dumb and helpless; she went back into the cabin.

A lop-sided moon came up and shouldered over the top of the bluff. Dave watched it idly; and watching, fell into a restless, fitful sleep. How long he slept, he had no idea. He was suddenly awake. He lay perfectly still, except for the fingers of his right hand, which closed around the stock of his rifle.

The moon was well up now; and a patch of black shadow covered the west wall of the cabin. A sound—faint, but unmistakable—of some one moving. Dave's eyes bored into the darkness; but he was not woodsman enough to know whether the sounds were human or made by some prowling animal.

Another sound; a light, metallic one

as if some one were stealthily scraping earth with a metal tool. He sat up. Came a long interval of silence broken by the dismal hooting of an owl. Dave shivered a little, and gripped the rifle tighter. Again the silence; immense; complete. Gradually, Dave relaxed. But it was an hour before he fell into a deep sleep.

Joan, a wan, pathetic figure, was getting breakfast when he awoke. A thin ribbon of smoke was rising from the cabin chimney, into the still, sun-washed air. She smiled bravely at his "good-morning." Dave felt a wave of pity surge over him.

"Whatever she's done, she takes her medicine like a thorobred, damn it!" he said to himself.

He helped her with the breakfast dishes. Afterward, they went out and sat on a bench beside the cabin.

"Would it help any to tell about your trouble?" asked Dave with an effort.

Joan hesitated so long, he added:

"If you'd rather not tell, it's all right."

"I think it *would* help," Joan answered, finally.

"I had some trouble at home," he said. "That's why I'm here. I know it's not easy to talk of it."

"Oh!" she cried with quick sympathy, "I didn't know!"

Then she said, abruptly:

"My father stole a lot of money from a bank where he was employed. He fled. I had no money nor any friends who were near enough to trust. Oh, yes, they were sorry; but I was an outcast. They made sure I should not forget. I tried a good many things. But I had no training for anything useful. One night, I met a stranger on the street. He was kind to me; he took me to dinner. I expected he would—would—exact payment. I had supposed that kind of man always did. He asked me my name; and I gave him a false one. But I wasn't even a good liar. He said:

"'No, your *real* name.'

"So I told him.

"'Not *Jerry* Crossland's daughter?' he asked.

"'Yes,' I said, 'his daughter.'

"After a while he said:

"'Listen, girlie, this is going to turn out all right. Tomorrow, you meet me at the Pennsylvania Station at noon. If you play square with me, I'll fix it soft for you. Will you?'

"I promised, and next day I met him. He had a ticket for Chicago, and some money—quite a lot of it. He gave these to me, and a letter of introduction to Corporal Hall. There was also a letter of instruction. My father was hiding in Canada, and my benefactor was a pal of Hall's. I was sure they were crooks; and yet there was always the idea that I was going to meet father. They had befriended him, and I was grateful. I met Hall at last. Hall read the letter I gave him, and he looked at me queerly.

"'So Sam Wilson gave you this, eh?'

"'I don't know what his name is,' I said.

"He looked at me in a way some men have. It stung me; though God knows how I should have had any pride left.

"'You took a chance at Sam Wilson,' he said. 'Well, there's nothing wrong with your nerve, kid.'

"Hall took me to father, and I was so glad to be with him again. I think I forgot what we were—fugitives. It's an awful thing to go against the law; but living with outlaws is worse. Father became morose and sullen. We could go nowhere; make no friends. Hall came several times. He seemed to have lost interest in me, for which I was thankful. Finally, I discovered why. Father had hidden the money and refused to tell Hall where it was. They quarreled.

"'Be reasonable, Crossland,' Hall said. 'I only want half the loot, and the girl.'

"'No,' said father.

"'All right,' said Hall, 'I'll give you twenty-four hours to make up your mind. If you're reasonable, all right.

If not—well, there's a ten-thousand-dollar reward out for you, and I'm going after it.'

" 'How?' asked father. 'As Kid Garvin, or Corporal Hall? Better go easy, you murderer!'

"But Hall only laughed.

" 'Twenty-four hours,' he said.

"We left that night. Hall almost caught us, but we had eighteen hours' start. By the time he located us here, father had buried the money. Hall raved, but father laughed at him. I asked father why he had called the corporal 'Garvin.'

" 'That's his name,' father said. 'He's a crook, and a gunman. I'd kill you rather than see you the wife of that rat!'

" 'I'll get the girl anyway, in the end,' the corporal said when he caught up with us; 'you haven't long to live, and I'll get her finally.'

"Then you came."

She looked off across the clearing to the jack-pine outlined against the morning sky.

"Where is Jacques?" she asked, suddenly.

"Probably gone to get some fresh meat," Dave answered.

The vagaries of Jacques were of no interest at the moment.

Dave got up and went down to the sand-pit. Joan watched him, but made no offer to follow. He had made no comment upon the things she had done, and it hurt. She was fair enough not to feel resentment; but some tiny word of comfort, some sympathy would have meant so much! After a little, she followed him. He heard her steps and turned and smiled. She stopped, and for a moment they stood face to face on the sand.

"That day you fainted from hunger, Joan," he said, "was a bitterer day for me than you. I picked you up and found myself looking into the face of a blackguard who I thought was a friend. He blackmailed me and in a moment of weakness I gave him money. From then on he bled me. Finally I revolted. He told my fiancée, and she believed him. Then he came back and taunted me. I lost my temper; and—and I killed him."

Joan put out her hand toward him.

"It doesn't—seem—to—to—make any difference," she said.

And then, somehow, she was in his arms.

"God, no!" said Dave, pushing her from him. "I was mad!"

"Yes, mad perhaps," said Joan; "but this is our hour, Dave, dear."

Her heart was in her eyes and voice.

Dave held her by the shoulders, gripping their rounded slenderness till his knuckles went white.

"No, dear," he said, his voice held steady by the utmost effort.

For a moment, their eyes held; then he released her.

It was late afternoon when Jacques returned.

"Where on earth have you been?" Dave asked.

Jacques shrugged.

"To Bancroft."

"Bancroft?" said Dave incredulously; "that's thirty miles."

The half-breed nodded. Then he glanced up the slope to the jack-pine with its mound of fresh-turned earth. There was a question in his eyes, and Dave nodded.

"So," said Jacques; "at last he has peace, yes."

And he made the Sign of the Cross.

Joan came out of the cabin. She smiled at Dave. Jacques caught the look that passed between them; his eyebrows raised for an instant. He took a roll of newspapers from his coat and handed them to Joan. He smiled at her thanks and sat down upon the rude bench without further words. Joan and Dave fell upon the newspapers ravenously. For a time, only the rustle of turned pages broke the utter stillness. Sick with fear at what he might find, Dave searched the printed sheets. Suddenly his grip tightened; his head dipped forward closer to the paper.

"Joan!" he whispered hoarsely.

She leaned over his shoulder and read the item that Dave pointed out; his finger trembled a little. A marriage notice; the names and addresses of the bride and groom.

"It's Hamilton!" he cried; "I didn't kill him, after all!"

There was a note in his voice that only comes from those who know relief from bondage. Reaching up, he pulled Joan's head down beside his own. After a moment, Joan asked softly:

"The girl; was—was it—she?"

"No," said Dave.

"Are you going back to her?" Joan questioned.

For answer, he took her hand and led her outside to where Jacques sat on the bench.

"Jacques," he demanded, "is there a priest or a justice at Bancroft?"

"M'sieu, there are both," Jacques answered.

"Get the duffle packed, then," Dave said; "we start early tomorrow morning."

The vision of a wedding with orange blossoms, veils, bridesmaids, and the solemn thunder of a pipe-organ faded from Joan's mind. In its stead came the austere quarters of a settlement parish house; a picturesque half-breed guide as their only friend; the deep-throated voice of the wind in the pines—and Dave.

As if divining her thought, he bent and kissed her forehead.

THE sun was well up when they started for Bancroft. The grass was stiff with frost that set the blood tingling pleasantly; and the river sang with a new allurement to Joan and Dave. Jacques threw a bucket of water on the cook-fire and came down to the water's edge where they were waiting.

"Last night," said Jacques, "I had a queer thought—what you call a hunch. It comes again this morning."

"Well?" asked Dave.

"It is about the money," Jacques replied with a jerk of his head toward the new-made grave.

They were silent for a moment.

"M'sieu," the half-breed went on, "both you and Mees Joan have the thought that the man who died meant you should bury him at the foot of the jack-pine. Well, I have seen many kinds of men; they have not whims about their graves in a strange and not too friendly land. No."

"The money was hidden there?" Dave asked.

Jacques nodded.

Dave turned to Joan.

"We must take it back, dear," he said.

"It would haunt me all my life if we left it," she assented.

"That is bravely said, m'am'selle," said Jacques with his quick smile. "But I have not the faith. Last night, I find thees money and take it to Bancroft. The commandant is a square man. Also, I tell him of Kid Garvin." He shrugged. "What you call a grim joke, eh?"

"I understand, and thank you, Jacques; you are a real friend," said Joan, and she gave him both her hands.

"I beg m'am'selle will not mention it," Jacques answered.

Then he turned to Dave.

"And your trouble is better, yes?"

"I ran away too soon," said Dave; "the man recovered."

"Well," said Jacques, steadying the canoe while Joan got in, "one cannot have all the luck."

Then he shoved the canoe off the sand-pit.

The Passing of Pizen Hart

By Eric Swain

Desert—"Pizen Hart" carries a slow-action gun but a fast trigger-finger

"THAT'S a right valyooble dawg, 'Doughnuts.' Course he ain't perfec' but he's plumb onusual."

"Onusual shore describes that animile," 'Drowsy.' He's so doggone onusual he's yoonique."

"Doughnuts" squirmed his bare toes in the warm powdery dust of the road while he considered these remarks. He was suspicious, particularly of Drowsy Winn. He liked Drowsy a lot but he had reason to believe that young man sometimes failed to accord him the respect due his maturity of nine years.

"Just look him over, boys," resumed Drowsy, indicating the puppy worrying an old boot laboriously dragged from beneath the store platform. "That's the bulldog blood in him bustin' out in them worryin' tactics."

"Is that bulldog blood, Drowsy?" asked Fingers Burke, looking up from an open can of tinned peaches. "The set of his ears looks like he was more wolf hound."

"From heels to hocks that dog's all Great Dane," put in Charley Harper. "My ol' man used to raise Great Danes back in Kentuck', an' I knows Great Dane hocks when I see 'em."

"That brush o' his is clear strain Irish Setter or I'll herd sheep," opined Hunchy Jessup.

"I'd sure admire to own him myself," gravely stated Matt Demers. "Them liver colored spots on his nigh shoulder convinces me he's a coon houn'. Want ta sell him, Doughnuts?"

"Naw, I d' wanna sell him," replied Doughnuts defensively. "He ain't any o' them kind o' dawg, neether. Paw says he's mostly collie."

"Now there's a bet I overlooked complete," admitted Drowsy, "an' all them points count when it comes to puttin' a valyoo on a dawg. Don't

you let Matt skin you, Doughnuts. I'll bet he wasn't goin' to offer you more'n a measly fifty dollars fer the pup, were you Matt?"

This last was addressed to the portly merchant and accompanied with an almost imperceptible droop of Drowsy's right eyelid.

"Fifty dollars," gasped Doughnuts, his eyes fairly popping with amazement. "Why— Why——"

"Looky here, Drowsy," broke in Matt. "Seems to me fifty dollars is a mighty han'some price fer any dawg, providin' I decides to make sech an offer."

"That's certainly important money for an ord'nary dawg, but this yere pup of Doughnuts is onusual, like I said," rejoined Drowsy.

"A hundred dollars is the reg'lar price for any thorrerbred dawg. That makes Doughnuts mange dodger there worth, roughly speakin', about two hundred an' fifty dollars. We've done recognized five breeds already—bulldog, wolfhound, great dane, setter an' coon hound. Even cuttin' the reg'lar price in half an' callin' it fifty dollars a throw makes a mighty vallyooble animile out of Doughnut's pup."

"Two — hundred — an' fifty — dollars," breathed the dazed Doughnuts.

The admiring gaze Drowsy directed at the pup was a masterpiece of convincing sincerity.

"Gosh," exploded the delighted youngster. "I just knew he was a swell dawg when I picked him out. Bet Paw will be sorry now he drowned the other five."

Freckled, towheaded Doughnuts was a favorite with them all. Not for worlds would they knowingly offend his sensitive boy dignity, but every glance at the shaggy, lop-eared, nondescript mongrel tickled their risibilities. So occupied were they in maintaining a calm exterior for Doughnuts' benefit that even Drowsy was a trifle belated in sweeping off his sombrero when a pleasant feminine voice brought him scrambling to his feet.

"Why, Doughnuts, is this lovely puppy yours?"

The owner of the voice included them all in a single smiling nod of greeting.

"Yes'm, Miss Martin, he's mine an' he's worth more'n two hundred an' fifty dollars," replied Doughnuts proudly. Detecting Miss Martin's look of surprise, Doughnuts gleefully pointed out the many strains in his puppy's doubtful pedigree.

"So Drowsy says he's worth two hundred and fifty dollars, didn't you, Drowsy?" he demanded.

"Well, ah!—you see——" stumbled the redoubtable Drowsy in some confusion.

"Oh, I'm sure he is a splendid dog, Doughnuts," broke in Miss Martin, coming to Drowsy's rescue, "he has the friendliest eyes of any puppy I know."

Bestowing a pat on the puppy, she mounted the steps to the store platform. Pausing in the doorway and addressing Doughnuts, though the merriment dancing in her eyes was directed at the group on the steps, she added,

"When it comes to recognizing the good points in a dog, Doughnuts, you can rely on your friends as fine judges of cattle."

The merry chuckle that floated back thru the door evoked answering grins on the faces of his friends, but Doughnuts was satisfied. They always acted funny when the teacher was around anyway.

"Why didn't you offer her one of your peaches, Fingers?" softly asked Drowsy.

Fingers startled glance revealed half of an exceedingly juicy canned peach tightly clutched in his good right hand.

"Doggone it," he wailed, hurling the messy if unoffending fruit far

into the road, "that's the third time she's caught me all smeared up with something. Last time it was canned tomato's."

The group on the steps subdued their mirth as best they might for they had no desire to convey to the little teacher the thought that she might have caused it. Nevertheless a newcomer drifted up before the chuckles had subsided.

"Laugh, ye pore cow chasin' fools," he derided, plumping himself on the bottom step. "It's all yer good fer. There ain't a real top hand in Cochise County, less'n it's with a running iron, an' yer all top hands with that!"

Though smiling faces grew swiftly grim and tight lipped, no one offered comment or answer. Poison, or more commonly Pizen Hart was something of an institution in Gopher, if a despised and undesirable one. A weazened, bandy legged survivor of an older day, he occupied a niche of his own. Admittedly the meanest man in Arizona and proud of it, he merited his unpleasant title by his unvarying cussedness.

Pizen was a real two-gun man, deadly as a sidewinder and just about as venomous. There was no lack of convincing proof that, except when he was drunk and denuded of his weapons by the marshal, he was prepared to back his matchless deviltry with equally matchless gunplay.

Getting no response to his intimation that his audience were cattle thieves—accusing a man of being too clever with a running iron amounts to calling him a rustler in the cattle country—Pizen noticed the puppy lolling in the dust.

"Whose wuthless mongrel is that?" he demanded.

"He ain't no mongrel. He's a good dawg an' he's mine," defended the pup's owner. Doughnuts was afraid of Pizen but pride surmounted fear.

"A good dawg," scoffed Pizen. "He's as wuthless as yore brand blottin' nester of a father," and he snapped his fingers at the pup.

Instantly the pup scrambled to his feet and trotted over. Snapping fingers had so far meant a head rub, a romp, or a gentle ear pulling, and he was always ready for any or all of them. Planting himself at Pizen's feet, he cocked his head on one side and, tail awag, waited for the fun to begin.

Pizen leaned over that the range might be less and accuracy greater, and expertly shot a stream of tobacco juice full in the little dog's face.

For a split second the scraggly tail continued to wave. Then the burning fluid penetrated the sensitive membranes of eyes and nostrils literally standing the poor animal on its head with agony. Twisting and rolling, it strove to rub its flaming eyes in the dust. Pawing and scratching at its head, the little beast became the center of a whirling dust cloud from which emanated a surprising volume of almost childish wails of anguish.

A rush of light footsteps crossed the platform and a lithe figure scooped the puppy out of the dust. There was a patter of quick commands.

"Run, Drowsy, get some water"—"Jessup, give me your handkerchief"—"Doughnuts, help me hold him"—"There, there doggie, poor little chap!"

Miss Martin took the puppy in her lap, Doughnuts holding the squirming little body firm while she gently swabbed the burning nose and eyes with Hunchy's best bandanna sopped in the water Drowsy had brought from the pump in his hat.

The gentle hands, the cooling water and the caressing voice soon reduced the wails to whimpers. With her patient on the way to recovery, Miss Martin relinquished him to his frankly crying owner. Eyes blazing

with wrath and face white with anger, she turned on the sneering Pizen.

"You—you—you drunken beast," she began, her voice a flat monotone of fury.

"You deliberately called that friendly harmless little puppy just to torture him. And they say men are afraid of a sneaking cowardly thug like you."

She struck the sneering lips a stinging blow with the flat of her palm that brought Pizen to his feet with a vicious sound, half oath, half snarl.

Drowsy swung Miss Martin swiftly and none too gently aside and himself faced the furious Pizen who crouched with his right arm slightly bent at the elbow, fingers curved for the lightning clutch of the draw.

"Reach fer yore iron, Pizen."

Drowsy's voice was pitched low but charged with the menace of instant and deadly action.

Very slowly Pizen's clutching fingers relaxed.

"My hardware's with the marshal like it allus is when I've been drinkin'," said Pizen. "Nary a gun on me! Shoot, damn ye! It's jest yore size t' go pawin' fer war when ye know I ain't heeled!"

"I might have knowed it, you yaller hound. You've played that game fer the last time. Get this. I'll be lookin' fer you tomorrow, an' drunk or sober I'll gun you shore. Now light a shuck outta here—*pronto!*"

"I was throwin' lead at better men than you'll ever be before you was born," returned Pizen. "You won't have fer t' look."

"Better give that fist swingin' school ma'am yore last messages," he flung back over his shoulder, as he lurched off in the general direction of the Aces Up.

Five pair of eyes watched his departure. Doughnuts glared his boyish hatred thru his tears. Shack, Hunchy and Fingers eyed him with a speculative dislike and disgust and Miss Martin's eyes were wide with an abhorrence tinged with fear, while Drowsy's narrowed lids bespoke a calculating determination.

The renewed whimpering of the puppy broke the tension. Drowsy relaxed into his usual indolent seeming self and patted the squirming bundle in Doughnut's arms.

"Hard lines, Ol' Timer," he drawled, "But you'll forget all about it right quick."

"Valyooble is correct," remarked Hunchy to no one in particular. "'Taint every dog's troubles leads to Boot Hill."

"You'll smoke Pizen up, won't you, Drowsy?" demanded Doughnuts vindictively.

"Never mind, son, you trot along home with that pup. He's gonna need nursing aplenty an' bathin' them eyes of his will keep you out o' mischief. Drag along now."

"Drowsy Winn, are you actually going to fight a duel with that old ruffian over a puppy?"

Miss Martin's voice was incredulous, but her face was very white. She liked the smiling, light-hearted chap whose sleepy manner, masking an unusual degree of mental and physical alertness, was so aptly expressed in his nickname. But this was a different Drowsy, watching the departure of the reluctant Doughnuts. The gray blue eyes had gone all gray with a flat surface brilliance rather than a warm twinkling depth. The lines of the whimsical half smile about the mouth were deeper etched, the lips thinned, the chin somehow more prominent giving an effect of ruthlessness. Here were both power and purpose.

"Jessup, Morgan, surely you won't permit such a thing—why it's absurd. Grown men killing each other over a puppy. Burke, you'll get the marshal to arrest the old—old——"

Her voice faltered and trailed into silence. She was stunned with the realization that these chaps who a few moments before had been placidly sunning themselves as they chaffed a barefooted youngster about a ridiculously puppy calmly accepted as inevitable a duel to the death over that same puppy.

She had heard the casual gossip current in every cattle town about its killings and its killers. Little attention as she had paid it at the time, she sensed now that Pizen's name had been mentioned with sinister frequency.

She visualized the dusty street when on the morrow this new Drowsy should do battle with Pizen. She saw again the bitter eyed, snarling face above the lean crouching body, the bent arms, the tense fingers widespread and slightly hooked like talons ready to clutch at death. And facing this personification of experienced evil, she pictured the clean smiling youth of Drowsy Winn —pictured it and grew cold.

"Drowsy, promise me you won't fight this awful Pizen——"

"Why, Ma'am," broke in Drowsy, "there ain't no call to get excited. Pizen's just quarrelsome drunk. I'm sorry you got mixed into such a mess, I shore am. You go long in with Mrs. Demers now and get yore nerves quieted up."

It was almost an hour later that, relaxed by the motherly ministrations of Matt Demers' kindly wife, the little teacher suddenly realized that Drowsy Winn had made no promises.

CHAPTER II
"Scorched Lightning"

Meantime Pizen Hart was making war medicine with Scar Vachon, barkeep of the Aces Up. Every human being seeks a confidant, and Pizen came as close to liking Scar as his nature would permit. Probably because Scar was as unlovely physically as Pizen was himself. He had given Scar his own version of the happenings at the general store and explained the need of straightening up within the next fifteen hours that there might be no hitch in his program downing Drowsy Winn.

"You be'n middling drunk for most a week now," remarked Scar. "If you quit cold yore nerves'll be all aflutter tomorrow. Better just taper off, takin' a drink whenever you really needs it. Thataway you'll be cold sober by sunup and plenty steady in the head an' hands. From all I hears this Winn is some sudden with a gun."

"Just so I'm reasonable steady myself I ain't worryin' none about how fast Drowsy is," replied Pizen.

"You goin' to get yore guns offen the marshal?" asked Scar as he polished a glass with a grimy looking towel.

"Nope, he wouldn't give 'em to me. You better let me take yores. Ruther have my own, but forty fives is forty fives, an' yores'll have to do."

"Seems like you take an awful chance handling over yore hardware ev'ry time you likker up, Pizen. It's a wonder somebody ain't bumped you off long ago."

"That's where you lack savvy, Scar," declared Pizen with a leer. "Sence the law came to Cochise County 'tain't legal to down gents what ain't heeled. Tharfor I checks my guns with the marshal an' enjoys my lil' bender all safe an' serene. If I keeps them guns of mine somebody's likely to down me when I'm too drunk to swing 'em."

"Yore crazy like a fox, Pizen," admired Scar. "Better take a little jolt now an' then catch forty winks in the back room."

To this timely suggestion Pizen readily assented and Scar conducted

him to his own sleeping quarters, a small room opening off the rear of the bar.

"There," he directed, "you camp in yere awhile. You'll find th' bunk plenty soft enough, an' I'll bring you a drink whenever you wakes up."

"Better bring me one right now to go to sleep on."

Pizen seated himself on the edge of the bunk and leaned his elbows on the rickety table which, with a chair, a cracked mirror tacked on the wall, and a row of spikes serving as clothes hooks, completed the furnishings of the room.

Over one of these spikes hung a belt from which projected the butts of a pair of holstered forty fives. When Scar returned with bottle and glass, Pizen was carefully adjusting the belt about his own lean hips. He swung the holsters low and slightly to the rear of his thighs so that his finger tips brushed the projecting gun butts. This done to his satisfaction, he laced the holsters firmly in place with leather thongs tied round his legs.

Drawing the heavy weapons, he tested them carefully for weight and balance, snapped them back into the holsters and drew again. A dozen times he repeated the process until the big guns seemed fairly to leap into his hands of their own volition.

"Shades o' Bill Hickok an' Doc Halliday," marvelled Scar. "If you can handle strange guns like that at the fag end of a week's drunk, I'd admire to watch you work when you was cold sober."

"Purty slow, Scar, purty slow," demurred Pizen. "Set the bottle down an' get me a rag an' a little oil. I'm gonna clean an' oil these here cannon o' your'n. Action's prob'ly stiffer'n hell."

As Scar departed for the required articles, Pizen helped himself to a stiff drink, resumed his seat on the edge of the bunk and set to work on the guns. He had ejected and piled the cartridges in the center of the table when Scar returned with oil and rag.

"Just like I thought," grumbled Pizen, fanning the hammer of one of the guns on the empty chambers with his thumb. "Action's all gummed up. Take me a good two hours to get these here Colts into shape fer use."

The entrance of a trio of thirsty patrons called Scar back to his professional duties, and he departed so hurriedly he forgot to take the bottle with him.

Engrossed in his task, Pizen absentmindedly helped himself to a drink, and shortly after to another. As he labored he had more and more frequent recourse to the bottle. Years of steady drinking and a rawhide constitution had endowed him with the ability to carry his liquor well. The encounter with Miss Martin and Drowsy had had a sobering effect, and now as he drank the fiery stuff seemed actually to steady him.

But as his fingers lost a slight tendency to fumble at their tasks, his whiskey-inflamed mind reverted to the scene at the general store. The more he drank the more he thought of it, and the more his venom centered on the little school teacher. Drowsy he would down on the morrow. Of that he entertained not the least doubt so sure was he of his prowess with a gun. With every drink the memory of that blow across the lips grew bitterer. It was a debt that called for payment, and as his busy fingers brought Scar's guns to the ultimate pitch of deadly efficiency, his devious brain conceived a plan for its collection. A plan such as only a drunken man, particularly a drunken Pizen, could have devised.

He finished gun cleaning and bottle together. With a grunt of satisfaction he holstered the weapons and straddled his way back to the bar room. There he found Scar minis-

tering to the wants of three hard looking citizens lined up at one end of the long bar.

"Set out anuther bottle o' that scorched lightnin'," he demanded peevishly.

"Shore thing, Pizen," assented the amazed Scar, for here, instead of a sobering was a freshly and ugly drunken Pizen.

"Better go light on th' likker, Ol' Timer," he advised.

"When I asks fer likker," snarled Pizen, "I wants likker! Ef yore honin' to pass out advice pass it to them puny lookin' pilgrims yonder."

Scar hastened to set out bottle and glass. The anything but puny looking pilgrims, after one look at Pizen, decided to forego any undue sensitiveness. Drunk he undoubtedly was, but it was a drunkenness of the mind more than of the body. Plainly the gunman, and equally plainly on the prod, the pilgrims found it prudent to retire to one of the small tables opposite the bar.

Balked in his desire for battle, Pizen turned to the bottle.

"You ever been in love?" he demanded of Scar, pouring himself a drink with a remarkably steady hand.

"Wh—Wha—Wha-at?" gasped the astounded barkeep.

"I asked you was you ever in love," replied Pizen, downing the drink.

"Prob'ly not, with a face like yours t' handicap you. Ef that map of yourn wasn't planned special t' scare a woman t' death I'd take you in on somethin' good."

The three at the table, whose interest in Pizen's baiting of the barkeep had been purely casual, became alert. Here was talk of something good. And their alertness was rewarded with sundry phrases, single words, disjointed sentences. Pizen was telling Scar of his plan, and while Scar did his diplomatic best to keep Pizen from talking too loudly and too much, lowering his own voice to its most confidential pitch, he was but partially successful.

It was a wild plan that Pizen unfolded to the worried Scar. He would avenge himself upon the teacher for that blow across the mouth and unnerve Drowsy Winn at one and the same time. He would toll the teacher out to Labyrinth Gulch with the tale that Doughnuts had fallen and hurt himself.

Once there he would slip away and leave her, confident that she could never find her way out of the confusion of blind arroyos, winding drifts and sprawled rock masses before darkness fell. After that he would trust her terror to people every shadow with a threat and endow every night sound with mysterious menace. The fright she got would pay full price for the insult offered him.

Drowsy Winn would hear of her disappearance promptly enuf. Let her fail to return to Matt Demers where she boarded at the usual time, and every ablebodied man in Gopher would be searching for her within two hours. Drowsy, whose affection for Miss Martin Pizen shrewdly suspected, torn with anxiety and worn with a long night of fruitless hunt among the hills, would be an easy prey.

In vain the desperate Scar pointed out the weaknesses of Pizen's plan. The fact that the teacher would never accompany Pizen alone, but would immediately rush back to Gopher for help. The fact that Doughnuts was probably in school anyhow. The fact that if she disappeared Pizen would be immediately suspected and might only succeed in getting himself lynched. The fact that Labyrinth Gulch would be the first place searched for a lost tenderfoot.

With the obstinacy typical of drunkenness, Pizen clung to his plan. The more urgent grew Scar's opposition, the firmer became his deter-

mination to put it into effect. And as they argued the hard looking gentry at the table, by dint of much carefully disguised ear stretching caught such phrases as—"Labyrinth Gulch—It's a sure-fire cinch—school teacher—It's gotta be done tonight—I wouldn't take a thousan' dollars," as they fell from the lips of the gunman.

Detecting an increasing watchfulness and suspicion on the part of Scar, they pushed aside their emptied glasses, shoved back their chairs and drifted out. At the hitchrack along with their bronks drowsed with the dejected weariness of their kind the hardest looking of the three remarked softly.

"Sounds like a chat with this yere school teacher might be interestin'."

"Wouldn't do no harm to drop by an' say howdy," grinned a companion.

"Mebbe if we suggested her takin' a ride with us she might tell all about whatever it is our gun totin' friend back there wouldn't take a thousan' dollars for to lose," mused the other.

"Let's ramble," decided the first. "We'll hole up in a coulee and make our call right after school lets out. That Pizen *hombre* will be paralyzed in another hour at the rate he's downin' likker now. That gives us a chance to draw cards—teacher'll talk alright."

They mounted and rode leisurely past the store and disappeared round a bend in the trail.

CHAPTER III
Pizen and the Puny Pilgrims

Your true cowman is a fatalist, Not in the initiative killing sense of the Mohammedan who believes that every man's fate is graven on his forehead and must be met with such resignation as any follower of the Prophet may summon. Rather in the sense that so long as he lives up to the code of the range lands, consequences should rightly be the last of his worries. The constant hazard of life and limb which is as much a part of range life as the cattle from which it takes its source naturally develops such a philosophy.

Hunchy Jessup, Shack Morgan and Fingers Burke would unobtrusively but none the less effectively see that Drowsy Winn got a fair break in his battle with Pizen.

Whatever their apprehensions as to the outcome of that battle, for Pizen was admittedly an accomplished killer and Drowsy their well beloved saddle mate, tomorrow was another day. Today still offered idle hours in which to test anew the oft-tried entertainments Gopher had to offer.

Hence, they dined generously at Chen Ling's restaurant, imbibed mildly and ceremoniously at Ferguson's Oasis bar, and wrangled with the privileged acrimony of long friendship over Fergy's battered billiard table. That exasperated worthy, called upon to decide which of the balls was easiest to recognize by its shape, finally broke up the game by seizing the spot ball and retreating behind the bar.

Back they rambled then to the general store which was also the post office, to await the arrival of the Ocatilla stage. There they were engaged in chaffing the perspiring proprietor when the three puny pilgrims rode out of town.

"Nice reefined lookin' bunch," remarked Fingers ironically as the strangers rode by.

"The big jasper on the paint pony reminds me o' Matt, here," stated Hunchy. "He has the same sweet expression round his mouth Matt allus has when I ask him for six bits worth of makin's, jawbone, pament."

"Jest fer that," replied Matt with

some heat, "after this yore jawbone won't get you six bits worth of nuthin'. I don't make no claims to beauty, but I'll be ding whanged ef any leather grabbin' bronk topper can compare me to ev'ry unhung murderer roamin' loose an' get away with it."

"Yap! Yap! Yap!" barked Drowsy, in falsetto imitation of a small dog.

"You idjuts yappin' an' yammerin' at each other gimme a headache."

He yawned a trifle elaborately and swung himself down from the end of the counter.

"If there's any pretty picture cards in the mail don't deliver 'em till I get back, Matt. I'd hate to miss 'em an' I gotta take that Senility hawss of mine over to Riselay's an' have him shod."

"Drowsy shore is careful of that Senility hawss of his," approved Shack Morgan. "This'll be the fourth time in two weeks that bronk's been shod."

"Funny part of it is," added Hunchy, "you could set your watch by them shoein's too. Come along time fer school to let out an' Drowsy drops everything an' goes pesticatin' off to get that animile shod."

Somewhat red as to ears and cheekbones, Drowsy faced them from the doorway.

"You go to the devil," he instructed with great distinctness.

"He don't shoe hawsses neether," Fingers called after him as he rode away in the direction of the blacksmith shop.

"That'll delay him a bit anyhow," grinned Matt. "He wouldn't have the gall not t' stop at Riselay's after that."

Matt was right, for it was some twenty minutes later that Drowsy really started for the schoolhouse. A flattered and somewhat surprised blacksmith watched him go.

PIZEN HART let himself out the back door of the Aces Up. He was drunk, very drunk, but he slipped out of town unobserved. He moved with the automatic precision of a sleep walker, planting his feet firmly and carefully, wide apart.

The brush whipped against his legs, threatening to upset him. More than once his foot slipped in the sandy soil to the peril of his equilibrium, but he kept on doggedly. He was carrying out a plan—a great plan.

Just what the plan was he had forgotten. Hazily he remembered that it began at the schoolhouse. Anyhow that was where he was going, and he meant to get there. It was very hot in attempting to wipe the sweat from his eyes he knocked his hat off. Twice he attempted to stoop and pick it up, and each time he regained his balance with difficulty with a series of shuffling little side steps. Then he cursed the hat peevishly and went on without it.

At last he turned into the schoolhouse trail. The going was easier now and he made better progress. It was a nuisance to have forgotten that plan—it was such a good one. Doubtless it would come to him at the schoolhouse. He quickened his step, chuckling to himself. He'd show 'em—but he wished Scar was along to remind him of the plan. Scar would remember it alright.

He turned a sharp bend about an outcrop of rock and came in sight of his goal. As he approached it the door opened and a little group surged out. The three puny pilgrims were making that promised call. So interested were they that they did not immediately see Pizen. The hardest looking of the three was talking earnestly to the teacher. She drew away from him and he grasped her firmly by the arms. A smaller figure charged out the doorway and sailed valiantly into the teacher's captor,

kicking and biting desperately. It was Doughnuts. One of the other pilgrims cugged him savagely, sending him spinning.

Then the teacher screamed—a despairing terror stricken scream from the very bottom of her healthy young lungs.

That scream pierced Pizen's befogged consciousness with the realization that she was a part of his great plan, and that these strangers, whoever they might be, were interfering. Instantly his uncertain temper flared into an inarticulate shout of anger.

For the split fraction of a second surprise froze the group about the schoolhouse door into immobility. Then it dissolved with startling suddenness as the pilgrims leaped into activity. Fanwise they separated, one to the right, one to the left, the teacher's captor holding the center and swinging her in front of him as a shield. And all three snatched for their guns as they moved.

Quick as they were, Pizen was infinitely quicker. So lightninglike was his draw that it seemed like some conjuror's trick, and the big guns spoke as their muzzles cleared the holsters. The pilgrim at the left went down with his own gun but half drawn, crumpling forward with the roar of Pizen's first shot.

He at the right fared better, for though hard hit, he cleared his gun and returned Pizen's fire. But he had no chance against a gunman who tossed lead by instinct rather than by aim. Dropping his smoking weapon to clutch convulsively at his stomach, he stagged aimlessly away until his buckling knees dropped him in a grotesque sprawling heap.

Hampered by a struggling captive, the hardest of the three pilgrims was the last of all to fire, but the vantage lay all with him as Pizen dared not match him shot for shot for fear of hitting the teacher.

Once, twice, thrice he threw down on the advancing Pizen, firing with deliberate care. Each time his shot struck home with a vicious spat, Pizen rocking and staggering under the smashing impact of the big slugs. But he kept his feet and closed in, steadily.

Weazened, venomous killer that he was, Pizen was magnificent. One moment a hatless spraddle legged drunk, the next the supreme gunman, playing the only game he knew with the mastery of genius. With his hour striking and death leering in his face, with agony clutching at his vitals, he somehow kept his big guns steady and ploughed grimly on.

The hard-looking pilgrim's nerve was far from proof in the face of such chilled steel determination. It broke, and hurling the teacher aside, he ran for it.

Instantly Pizen's guns roared, but though the fugitive staggered in his stride, he kept on going. The smoking muzzles sagged and strive as he might Pizen could not get them up again. The running figure seemed ridiculously small and far away, too. He really didn't care any more. That wonderful plan, whatever it was, had gone all wrong somehow.

Pizen was desperately tired and it was good to slide face first into the grass and rest. He felt the ground shake under the pounding gallop of a horse and heard a flurry of shots. Laboriously he propped himself up again with one hand. Funny how heavy Scar's guns were—his own had never bothered him that way. It was dark too—he couldn't see clearly enuf to shoot.

So faint and far away it sounded almost like a whisper he heard some one call, "No, Drowsy. No!" Drowsy —Drowsy—that must be Drowsy Winn — there was something about

Drowsy Winn he ought to remember. Oh well, it didn't matter. With a long sigh Pizen slid forward into the grass and rolled down, down, down into warm black silence.

CHAPTER IV
While the Night Looked On

It may have been the violet shadows with which fatigue had brushed her lower lids that made Miss Martin's eyes so star bright. It may have been nervous excitement that had dyed her cheeks with a warm rose glow. Certainly so eventful a day gave cause enough for both.

From the moment that Drowsy Winn had swung her down from the back of his Senility horse to the welcoming arms of Mrs. Demers, she had been the center of a kindly, if curious group. As each of the good ladies of Gopher has heard of the battle at the schoolhouse she had dropped everything and hastened forthwith to offer whatever she might of service.

Not once but a dozen times had the little teacher told of the appearance of the three strangers with their demand that she tell them the secret of Labyrinth Gulch, and their threat to abduct her when she had insisted that she knew of no such secret. She had dilated on the courage of Doughnuts, and on the dramatic advent of Pizen.

Though her recollection of the fight that followed was more of an impression that a definite mental picture, she did remember vividly Pizen's dauntless into the fire of the stranger who had used her as a shield. To Pizen she had given full credit for withholding his own fire because of her, and so coming to his death. Again and again she had retold the tale of Drowsy's timely arrival, and of how he had ridden down the fugitive leaving a riddled, trampled heap in the brush.

And as she had repeated her story for the benefit of each newcomer, they in turn had brought their contributions to the sum total of the tale. Speculation as to the identity of the three strangers and what their purpose might have been ran riot. And as is generally the case, such speculation was wide of the mark. The strangers themselves had been consigned to Boot Hill with scant ceremony as having met with their just deserts. Public opinion was inclined to the belief that they had been plain ugly drunk. What Scar Vachon may have surmised he kept carefully to himself.

As for Pizen, that fallen warrior had been tenderly borne to the Aces Up and there, with a pool-table for a bier, he lay in state awaiting a funeral which should do credit both to Gopher and to the late deceased. Heartily as Pizen had been detested, Gopher felt that he had wiped clean his score, and gathered in wholehearted homage.

Whatever the debits in the ledger of his life and it was admitted that they were many and various, Gopher looked upon the final entry as atonement in a measure full and running over—the balance was on the credit side. The passing of Pizen Hart was to become an epic in the annals of Cochise County.

And now at last the little teacher sat alone in the Demers living room. The loquacious Matt had been grumblingly but none the less firmly sent about his business by a wise matron who had promptly taken herself off to the kitchen. That same wise matron was much too busy to pay any attention to the slow beat of boot heels on the porch, or to hear a hesitant knock at the door.

"I just dropped round to be shore you was alright," blinked Drowsy as

the little teacher admitted him to the warm lamplight.

"And to let me thank you," began his hostess.

"It was so—so awful," she shuddered, "All the shooting—and—and poor Pizen—dying in the grass——"

The little teacher was dangerously close to fresh tears.

"There, now, Ma'am, just don't you think about it. Pizen, he's 'prob'ly right proud things broke for him to take a hand."

"Oh. but Drowsy, if you had shot him, too, after he—he had——"

"But I didn't, Ma'am, and you can always remember you stopped me. Coming late like I did, and turnin' back from that other—ah—turnin' back to find Pizen tryin' to throw down on me I naturally took a shot at him. You knockin' up my arm saved him, an' sort of paid back what he did for you."

"He was dying, Drowsy, but he was still trying to help," replied the teacher thru her tears.

"There now," said Drowsy gently, "Pizen went out like he'd a wanted to."

"And you too, you risked your life to——"

"Just don't you think about it at all," put in Drowsy, hastily.

"Seems like I shouldn't have bothered you tonight, remindin' you of all that happened and gettin' yore nerves all strung up again."

He fumbled with his hat and moved over to open the door, feeling he should go but loath to do so. The teacher dried her eyes with a wisp of a handkerchief and followed him.

"Doughnuts paid poor Pizen a very great compliment," she said, softly. "He told me he was going to name his dog Pizen."

She smiled wistfully, coming very close to Drowsy.

"There doesn't seem to be any way I can thank you——"

"I wish," interrupted Drowsy huskily, "I wish——"

He paused, for the little teacher was very close and his heart beat so painfully words seemed to stick in his throat.

"I wish," he began again, leaning over to finish in a whisper,

"I wish I could kiss you goodnight."

The little teacher came very close indeed. So close her cheek pressed against the pocket of his shirt.

"And I wish," she whispered back, turning her face bravely up to his, "I wish you would."

Brown Eyes and Brown Bear

By Frank Richardson Pierce

Alaska—there's bear and bear—but brown ones don't come tame

"FOR two cents, Dave, I'd knock your block off—honest I would!"

"You ain't man enough, Sam," returned Dave Sloan with a cheerful grin. However if you ain't satisfied in your own mind, here's two cents."

Dave handed his partner a nickle.

"And keep the change!" he added, generously.

Sam pocketed the nickle and flushed. This was followed by a period of silence.

"Well," suggested Dave, "here I am and there're no fences around you!"

Sam scratched his head doubtfully.

"What's eating you any way," demanded Dave. "I can tell by the gleam in your eye you are half fooling. If I thought you really meant it I'd have popped you one on the jaw five minutes ago. When you see trouble coming, wade in, is my motto. You're lucky to find yourself altogether, so unbosom yourself."

"I always did hate women, that is I never liked 'em none, but I'm hanged if I'm going to see a woman deceived and lied to even if my best friend is doing it. Five years we've knocked about Alaska together and it's the first time I ever knew of you lying to anybody."

Dave flushed, half advanced.

"If you are meaning that little tourist girl . . ."

"I'm meaning her. You told her you were the best bear shot in Alaska and that once a man had hired you——"

"Well . . ."

"Well you never killed a bear in your life, but you told her among a lot of other things that once a girl friend wanted a bear skin the color of her eyes and you went out and got it. That was a lie! Bill Halsey was the one that done that!"

"That was before I fell in love with her," Dave replied, "then she was only a tourist and when tourists come to Alaska they expect to be lied to. If no-

body lies to them they are disappointed with the country and the people and I'm an Alaska booster first last and all time. Later——"

"You fell in love with her and now you're engaged. Well, I don't believe in mixing into other people's affairs, but I don't aim to have that little girl deceived. She's told everybody with the light of pride shining in her eyes that you're the greatest bear hunter in Alaska and nobody has the heart to deceive her. I'm going to tell her you're the salt of the earth except in the matter of bears —in that respect you're the biggest liar in Alaska and that's putting it as strong as it's possible."

"Listen, Sam, we've never had a word between us nor struck a blow, but if you get me in a mess you've got to get me out of it. If you don't I'll run you until your ankles melt even if you are running on ice."

With this half serious threat Dave Sloan departed.

For several moments Sam was thoughtful.

"It ain't right," he muttered. "It's all right to lie if people know you are lying, but Mary Hanna thinks Dave is a god —which he pretty nearly is. Well . . . here goes!"

Sam slipped on his parka and snowshoes and broke trail to Mary's home. Mary had fallen in love with Alaska and one of it's sons and was doing very well teaching school despite her youth. She greeted Sam warmly for perhaps she sensed she was robbing him of his partner.

Sam returned the greeting and summoned sufficient courage to look into her eyes. "My gosh!" he muttered, "her eyes are . . ."

"What is the matter Sam are you ill?"

"No, Mary, just kinda suffered a shock." Sam was not one to beat about the bush. He plunged. "You know I'm the best friend, that is man friend, Dave's got?"

"Yes, Sam!"

"You know I swear by him and I'm for him!"

"Yes, Sam!"

"Then if I tell you he's a liar you'll understand I'm not knocking him!"

"Hmmmm! I don't know about that!"

"Well, Mary, he's honest except about bears. You might say he's got a bear complex. The cuss never killed a bear in his life!"

"Oh, Sam!" She was dismayed. "I don't believe that. In fact I don't want to believe it. That was one of the first things that made me like Dave. He seemed so brave in the face of wounded bears charging him. Now there are a million things I like about him."

"Here, too!" Sam felt uncomfortable. "But I figured somebody should tell you."

"Thanks, Sam, it was very thoughtful of you—but I don't believe it. You are mistaken!"

"Well I won't argue the point, but I've done my duty. Maybe some day Dave will be the best bear hunter in Alaska, he's pretty good at everything else."

"Just a moment Sam before you go. Did you ever kill a bear?"

"I started to once, but he happened to be coming my way and I sort of lost the hankering when I saw how big he was. Well, good bye, and no hard feelings." Sam sauntered away.

Dave met his partner a hundred yards from Mary's home.

"Well Sam I can see by your eye you did your duty. That's all right but if you've gotten me into a mess, I'll be around!"

MARY HANNA was too clever to put Dave Sloan into a position from which escape was difficult. Instead she was diplomatic. She placed her hands on Dave's broad shoulders and vamped him. "Dave, you remember the story you told about getting a bear rug to match your little girl friend's eyes?"

"She wasn't much of a friend!" replied Dave, hastily.

"Now that we are engaged it will be quite all right for me to ask a favor?"

"Sure," he replied, "shoot! It's granted before it is even asked!"

"Thanks, Dave, I knew you would do as much for me! I want a rug the exact shade of my eyes!"

Dave's heart skipped a beat, then he looked searchingly into the depths of those upturned eyes. No, he simply could not refuse anything she asked, but he was entitled to groan even as Sam had mentally groaned when he had looked into Mary's eyes. "Sufferin' malemutes. Your eyes are brown!"

"And her eyes?"

"Were black!"

"What is the difference?"

When a man lies he must stick to it. Dave was game.

"The difference between a brown bear and a black bear!" he answered.

"A bear is a bear!" she suggested.

"Not in this country! A black bear is a friendly sort of a chap, but a brown bear is a rip-snorting, fire-eating mixture of muscle, bone, bad temper and claw!"

"But you've killed them many times before and so there is no danger. You know how?"

"Sure," he answered weakly. "I'll wait until the skin is prime then I'll get a rug for you!"

"Sam said the skins are at their best this time of the year!"

"Sam talks too much, but he's correct. I'll go out in a day or two. I'll have to get pretty well organized. I always believe in organization when it comes to brown bear. Let me look into your eyes again. Yep, I won't forget the color now!" Dave kissed his fiancée and departed. Back in his mind he wondered if it was a farewell kiss. The story he had related many times to tourists came back to him. It was the story that impressed Mary Hanna with his greatness:

". . . Well I had emptied my rifle and every shot had gone home, and yet he came on, snarling and biting out chunks of fur. There was nothing left to do but run and I ran for the nearest tree. When you hunt bear you have to take into consideration everything. I saw a pond ahead frozen over and crossed it. As I figured, the bear broke through and while he was getting out I had time to gain a bit. He came on and the nearest tree was a half a mile away. Presently I could feel his hot breath and I knew I had to do something. Queer, but I must have taken him by surprise, for I pulled a stunt I've seen the bull fighters in Mexico do. I let him charge, side-stepped and drove my hunting knife into his heart as he passed. That settled him. Finest skin I ever saw. Got it in my cabin now. Mighty close shave, but that was nothing to the time I was unarmed and being followed by a grizzly and threw a skunk at him. That time. . . . ."

Dave did not care to think of his famous bear stories, related so many times he was beginning to believe them himself. He followed the trail left by his partner to their cabin. Sam was expecting him and his manner was that of a man expecting physical combat. "We go bear hunting!" announced Sam.

"We?"

"Yes, we!"

"No, you mean you," answered Sam. "I looked into your girl's eyes and they're brown and it takes a large bear, one weighing close to a ton to match that shade of brown."

"What business you got looking into my girl's eyes?" growled Dave.

"I wanted to see what sort of a bear you had to hunt. Her eyes might have been blue or green. . . ."

"We take the trail in the morning," Dave announced, "better oil up your rifle and get some grub ready. The Alaska Road Commission reports bear on Bear Creek which is the first Bear Creek I ever heard of that actually had bear near it. The Commission invites us to use their tents up there. That'll save us packing our own tents. While you are getting the stuff together I'm going to talk to a couple of trappers and learn how to shoot bear."

Though reluctant to go, Sam decided all things considered he was getting off easy and agreed with enthusiasm, outwardly. He packed grub for the trail and examined dog sled and harness. It was dark when Dave Sloan returned. His mental state was very bad. He did not know it, but the trappers had lied to him very thoroughly and gotten away with it. Dave gathered from their accounts a hunter had less than a fifty-fifty chance with a bear in the open.

IT was late the following day that the pair made camp in one of the Road Commission's grading camps. They stirred up a batch of sour dough, dried out the tent and made themselves at home. While Dave prepared the evening meal in the cook tent Sam overhauled two bunks in a structure serving in Summer as a bunk house.

They ate the meal in silence and turned in immediately afterwards. The music of the river moving lazily between banks of snow lulled Sam to sleep, but Dave turned over frequently and counted sheep in an effort to slumber. His thoughts turned to bear.

Down in his heart he knew there was more than a gentle request in her mind when Mary Hanna asked for a bear rug the color of her eyes. Perhaps there was even the faintest bit of jealousy, but Dave never thought of that. He knew that it was a plea to justify her faith in his prowess, and it was this desire to make good that was driving him forward mercilessly.

Sam was snoring! At any other time Dave could have slept despite Sam's snores, but now it was impossible. "Turn over on your side!" he growled, "and cut out that snoring!"

Sam turned sleepily, there was silence, then he flopped back again. The snoring was resumed. Dave looked at his watch. Eleven o'clock. What a night! He was almost asleep after an eternity when Sam put on another record and snored louder than ever. Dave gathered up his blankets and made a bed on the floor of the cook tent. Presently he slept.

It was not quite dawn that a three-year-old brown bear, rather large for his age, a hundred percent baby by conservative judging, emerged from a timbered ridge and made his way toward the river. Frequently he sniffed. Once in his life he had tasted bacon scraps left by a prospector and he had never forgotten either the taste nor the scent. As he came nearer the river the scent became stronger.

He eyed the tents with interest and noted the presence of mankind, but being a brown bear he advanced rather than retreated. His keen nose led him to the cook tent. He entered and the flap fell behind him. His paws knocked over a coffee pot and two kettles in his efforts to reach the slab of bacon swinging just above. The rattle of the pot aroused the sleeper.

"Getting breakfast, Sam? Had a devil of a night, on account of your snoring. Make that coffee strong!"

The reply was a growl of deeper tones than Sam gave even in his grouchy moods. It was a sort of rumble as if the tones were being dragged over a washboard.

Dave leaped from his blankets with a wild light in his eyes.

"SAM!" he bellowed.

Distant peaks echoed the word. The next moment Dave had hurled the table, dishes and all at the intruder. The rattle of tin was deafening. The bear plunged headlong into the tent wall and ropes. The tent collapsed and somewhere beneath the violent bulging a man and bear sought to escape.

Sam leaped from his own tent and stood bare-footed in the snow with rifle in his hand. He did not know what to shoot at for bear and man made similar bulges in the wrecked tent.

"Now's your chance," yelled Sam excitedly, "you'll never have a better one. You always claimed when trouble came your way you waded in. Wade in and use your knife like you did in the story!"

"He ain't the right color!" screamed

the desperate partner who somehow had gotten on the bottom with the table, minus legs on top and the bear on top of the table. Condensed milk trickled down his neck, the pepper box came open and the bear snorted. "Hurry Sam, he's got me, I feel blood, my own cold blood trickling down my neck."

Sam leaped for the tent as the canvas was stained a deep red. The next instant he was sent sprawling as the seams parted and the bear emerged. Sam lifted his rifle and aimed. "Pink!" went the hammer as he pulled the trigger.

"Dog gone! Forgot to slip a ca'tridge in after I cleaned it!"

He jerked the lever, aimed and fired. The peaks echoed with the roar of the rifle, the bear dropped at the last shot and Sam stood with pink feet in the snow and empty rifle in his hands.

"Just the color of her eyes, too!" he announced, trying to warm one foot against the calf of the other leg.

The canvas parted and Dave Sloan emerged. In one hand he held the bread knife; his shirt was torn from his shoulders and across his chest were three furrows that only a bear's claw could make. His back was covered with condensed milk, salt, pepper and butter, garnished with sugar. His brow and face were wet for he had perspired heavily during the brief interval of the bear's arrival and departure.

"I'm through!" he announced, "I'm through hunting bears and telling bear yarns. I'm going to throw myself on the mercy of the court. Never again do I claim to be the greatest bear hunter in Alaska. There are other honors a fellow can go after. Still, Sam, we may as well dress, go over and skin your bear!"

"I aim to give it to her as a present if it ain't too badly riddled with bullets!" He looked at his partner. "You sure had a swell chance to get him with that knife while he was clawing you."

Dave nodded.

"Yep!" he admitted, "but I was trying to cut my way out. I did swing her at him a few times for luck, but mostly I was trying to cut my way out and when I did open a hole, the bear went through it."

MARY HANNA watched Sam spread a raw skin at her feet. It was a fine pelt, in prime condition.

"Oh, Dave!" she cried, "let's hear the story!"

"I'm through telling bear yarns and now that I've had a real experience some of the lies I used to tell are better. Sam, if you feel like telling her this yarn go to it. I'll back up anything you say!"

Sam flushed!

"I can't make myself a hero and I ain't going to try. Fact is on account of my snores Dave moved into the cook tent and the bear smelling bacon moved in too. Now I can't tell you exactly what happened, nor can Dave because neither of us seen it.

"Dave couldn't see because he was too close for a good view and I couldn't tell much by the bulges. Any way the tent fell down and Dave and the bear went to it. Dave tackled him with a knife and stabbed him through the heart."

The girl semed to freeze

"Dave and Sam I am disappointed in you. You are fibbing to me again. The two trappers who told you a number of bear stories followed along to see the fun and they saw it. They tell me Sam emptied his rifle at the bear after he left the tent!"

"Hah!" grunted Sam, "they told the truth; I did empty my rifle, but you see I must have been excited!"

He held up the bear skin.

"Not a hole in it except a single knife thrust over the heart. Shooting is one thing and hitting is something else!"

He held the pelt close and looked deep into the girl's eyes.

"By heck, the color is the same!" he exclaimed.

Red Rider

By Harrison Conrard

Far West—stealing a cowman's horse is gun-talk business in the West

A HORSE whickered somewhere up along the slope of the ridge. "Gringo" whinnied back an answer.

Gringo was "Buck" Green's top horse; a deep blood bay he was. With his master on his back—his lean, leathery, bowlegged master, who was the manager of the Snake's Head outfit. He was loping along the twisting trail that followed, at varying distance, the irregular contour of the base of the low ridge

Buck reined in to a halt and turned his searching gray eyes up the slope. He saw a puff of smoke spurt out from a clump of scrub oaks. Simultaneously a whine ripped the air perilously close to his ear, and, punctual to the menacing sound, came the stabbing note of a rifle crack.

Gringo left the trail in an abrupt side-stepping lunge. Buck's nimble wits worked swiftly. He slumped forward, lolled in the saddle, then toppled to the ground, easing his fall with a skilful flexing of his legs. He rolled over, flung wide one arm and let the other drop to his side, with the hand close to the butt of his .45. He came to repose with his eyes turned toward the ridge.

"Got to watch him an' at the same time make believe I'm clean done for, so's he won't spill no more shells," he told himself. "That 'un was too all-fired clost for the condition o' my good health, an' if he was to come ag'in mebby I'd find myself turrible ailin'—an' him, whoever the sneakin' varmint is, coiled up yander in the brush like a pizen reptyle. Mebby the sidewinder's beyant the range o' my six-pistol; but I'll shore admire to smoke it out with him when he shows himself in the open—an' him pumpin' a rifle, too."

Gringo stopped after sky-rocketing for a distance of some twenty or thirty yards. He snorted, turned about and came mincing back to sniff

inquiringly at his master. Buck's queer conduct puzzled him.

"I'm all here whole and entire, old hoss," Buck assured his solicitous mount. "I'm jes' playin' 'possum, for if I savvy the signs, that *hombre* up on yander p'int is real hostyle. Now don't you go an' plant yourself right slap dab squar' betwixt me an' him. I'm plumb daid, but I'm all sot to come alive soon as the reptyle slips out'n the brush; an' I'll shore be proud to chill it in him that they's more'n one shootin' iron in these here pe'tickler Arizona parts this lovely P. M."

When Gringo had satisfied himself that his master had not come to a tragic end, he withdrew a few paces and began nibbling at the juicy summer grasses that carpeted that portion of the Snake's Head range.

Soon a stealthy figure came emergent from the clump of oaks. Buck's fingers clamped tight on the butt of his gun; then they relaxed and lay limp.

"A skirt!" he ejaculated under his breath. "Now if that don't beat the Injuns! Ain't it a sight what the world's comin' to when the women folks has got to go out gunnin' to ketch a man? If it wasn't for that red bandanner she's got wropped acrost her face, mebby I might——"

His sentence stalled, broke off into a deep groan.

"No it ain't!" he muttered gutturally. "I'm jes' seein' things. 'Tain't reasonable it could be her—'tain't reasonable a-tall. That red dress she's wearin'—sho! Roxie Dawes ain't the only woman hereabouts that's plumb loco over gaudyous colors. Anyhow, she never could turn killer. Not Roxie. Great 'Hoss'phat! It's—it's preposperous!"

The masked person, with rifle ready, watched Buck intently for a scant five seconds, then whirled abruptly, ran to another clump of oaks some twenty yards away, disappeared, and soon came into view again, leading a blue buckskin pony.

"Roxie's grulla!" Buck gasped an oath. "It shore is! They can't be no misdoubtin' that hoss. I'd know him among a million even if I was to run onto him ten thousand miles from nowhere."

The red figure ranged the cedar-dotted area with a sweeping glance, then scabbarded the rifle with a quick thrust, leaped to saddle, rimmed down the slope swiftly and rode off along the base of the ridge at a scorching gallop.

"Seems like she must 'a' spotted somethin' disturbin' an' is plumb skeert all of a suddent," Buck observed mentally. "It's shore Roxie, an' no mistake. They ain't no other girl in these here parts can set a cack that purty. But Roxie don't never wear skirts when she laces herself on to a hoss. Leastwise, 'tain't her way. Always pants."

He swallowed a painful gulp.

"It was turrible misfortunate," he soliloquized gloomily, "that me'n Roxie had to have that fallin' out jes' when I was gittin' myself all primed to orate my lovin' feelin' to her, after I'd pit in nigh a whole year figurin' out the fittin'est way to do it.

"All the same, the redheaded little hell-cat hadn't never orter romped on me like she done when I beat up that no-account Bogus Parks after she'd tantalized me by lettin' him take her to the Wishbone frolic Saturday night—and her my regular girl 'most ever sence she come to be a widder, nigh on two years now. She shore done me mean."

He watched horse and rider until they disappeared round an elbow in the ridge, a full mile away.

"Now, I wonder if pittin' my lights out is Roxie's way o' lettin' me know that she's clean done with me," he speculated dismally. "Seems like old Dad Scroggs, her cantankerous pa, is daid sot on takin' that ornery Bogus

Parks into the family, Bogus havin' a nice little bunch o' critters all his own, while me—I ain't nothin' but an old cow-dog workin' for pay. Bogus' brand j'ined to Dad's 'd make the Twisty Z some neat outfit, but the old man'd shore be payin' a turrible price."

He came erect, retrieved his broad-brimmed white sombrero and slapped the dust from his rusty batwing chaps and red-and-green checkered shirt.

"She's out o' sight, so I reckon I dast h'ist myself," he concluded.

He jammed his hat on his head, shambled across to his horse and swung up.

"Mebby it wouldn't be good etiquette for a feller to chase down a lady that's totin' a .30-30," he admonished himself, as he built and lighted a smoke; "so I reckon the fittin'est thing I can do is to hit a back trail. She might take a suddent notion. . . ."

"Hey, Buck! Ain't you daid?"

Buck was both startled and dismayed when the high-pitched, quavering voice saluted his ears. He whirled about. "Bill" Doty, wizened and diminutive, who had grown old in the service of the Snake's Head, came plunging out of the cedars. He reined in to an abrupt halt some twenty yards away and stared at Buck in stark amazement, as though he had encountered a ghost in the trail.

"Good goshamighty!" he squeaked. "Aire it you for shore, Buck, or aire it your haint? You shore don't look daid—an' me fannin' the wind acrost the flat to gether up the bleedin' corpse."

"Corpse?" Buck had a moment of dizzy panic. So the distressing incident had been witnessed. It was most unfortunate. "What'd I want to be a corpse for?" he demanded.

"Well, I'll be everlastin'ly blowed!"

Bill drew a trembling hand across his bewildered eyes; then he put his mount in motion again and came on tentatively.

"If you ain't daid, then I'm shore plumb loco. An' ain't you hurt none a-tall, Buck?"

"Hurt?" Buck flared up with a start of anger. "Why, you sun-baked old varmint! What'd hurt me in these here peaceful parts? D'you reckon I'd git hooked by a horned toad?"

"Heh!"

Bill came closer.

"Well, this shore does beat me!"

"What's bitin' you, anyway?" Buck was recovering his poise.

"Why—why," Bill stuttered, "as me'n the boys topped yan rise"—jerking a thumb over his shoulder—"we seen that Twisty Z skirt you're so sweet on pop it to you from up the ridge, an' then you flopped from your hoss deader'n a skun dogie."

"You're plumb *loco!*" Buck fretted. "You must 'a' been mixin' *marajuana* with your makin' ag'in, old-timer."

He snapped up his head and flourished a nervous gesture toward a bald hummock off in the distance, over which, in plain view, some seven or eight riders were galloping.

"Them's the Snake's Head boys, ain't they?"

"Why, yeah, mebby so," Bill heaved, uncomfortably.

"They's no mebby so about it!" Buck rasped out. "You know durn well they're the Snake's Head boys—an' they're up to somethin'. What fool notion's takin' 'em acrost toward Twisty Z?"

"Why—why," Bill stammered in confusion, "you see it's this-a-way, Buck; the boys got all riled up over that turrible killin' what they 'lowed they'd seen, an' while I rid acrost to gether up the corpse, they calc'lated this was jes' the proper time to breeze it to Twisty Z an' clean up on that whole snaky outfit."

"Great 'Hoss'phat!" Buck groaned, giddy with swift consternation.

He wheeled and his horse jumped

to a gallop with the first savage stab of the spurs.

"Come on, Bill! Ramble! We've got to head 'em off!" he yelped. "Got to stop 'em! If we don't—"

He stifled the shout in his throat.

"If we don't," he addressed himself, "hell's bound to break loose betwixt the Snake's Head an' the Twisty Z—an' then they won't never be no Roxie for me."

He opened his lungs in a screechy command to the swift riding troop to rein in; but the distance baffled him. He emptied his six-gun into the air, hoping to draw a backward look; but the sound could not penetrate that thunder of hoofs. While he was reloading, the grim riders swung to the elbow in the ridge and disappeared.

Buck's rowels ripped the flanks of his mount in a pitiless urge. Gringo's stride lengthened; his nose reached out to cleave the wind like the beak of a hawk.

Gringo was fleet; he was true; and he gloried in a chase. Every fibre of his noble body was attuned to his master's will. His resilient hoofs pounded the earth in a swift drumbeat, as he streaked through the cedars like a spurt of flame.

WHEN he had come within a few leaps of the elbow, Buck heard a shriek behind him. He looked back over his shoulder just in time to see Bill Doty's mount turn a wildcat, its hoof in a treacherous prairie dog hole.

"That means good-by hoss; but the old varmint himself lit easy," Buck said mentally, when he saw Bill bounce to his feet. "Got to go it alone now. Ramble, Gringo, an' don't you go an' make none o' them same kind o' bobbles, old hoss."

He reached the elbow and swung round it. Ahead of him lay a stretch of open park, which led away almost to the Twisty Z ranch house, four miles or more distant; and pounding down its length was the grulla bearing the red-skirted fugitive, with the galloping threat behind closing in with remorseless purpose.

The realization of that purpose reached Buck with compelling force. It made his brain reel. The Snake's Head boys were running down the grulla and its rider. Already the troop had spread out in a nutcracker formation, and the two jaws were making ready to clamp shut.

The grulla's rider turned in the saddle and opened fire with a six-gun; but the pursuers had discreetly held themselves beyond pistol range. The Snake's Head men responded with a chorus of blood-chilling cat-squalls, stabbed through with a volley fired into the air.

Of a sudden the fugitive veered off at a sharp angle, eluded the left wing of the troop and drove straight toward a dense grove of scrub cedars, in which, a mile farther on, stood the Twisty Z ranch house. The red rider, in desperate straits, was reaching out for a refuge.

"The murderin' ki-yotes!" Buck gnashed as he swung to the angle. "If they hurt that pore girl—if they lay hands on her I'll pit their lights out, every last one of 'em! Ramble, Gringo! We've got to ketch 'em!"

His merciless spurs gashed blood from the flesh of his mount. He was gaining. Gringo, long-winded and tough as rawhide, warmed to the race and responded to his master's urge with gallant spurts of speed.

"Got to ketch 'em before——"

Buck's muttered sentence snapped off into an involuntary oath; a cold sweat began to ooze from his pores.

Gringo had hardly taken a dozen jumps on the new course when he stumbled, but recovered instantly, and went on. But there was now a halt in his gait, with a limp in his left foreleg. A moment later the fleeing grulla went down, its front foot in a

hole, and a red-shirted streak catapulted from his back and came violently to earth.

The pursuers spurred forward with a yell; but their advance was brief. Mounts were jerked sharply to their haunches when a tigerish fury snapped erect from the red blur and swung a six-gun to a stinging fire.

The long range served to cheat death, but did not save one of the Snake's Head men from a minor hurt. He reeled, but straightened promptly and kept to his saddle. Then came a chorus of strident ki-yis, and the jaws of the nutcracker began to close. The grim riders maneuvered warily, but with tragic swiftness.

Buck heaped maledictions upon them for their unscrupulous deviltry. A cold fury gripped him. Had he been within range at that moment, he would have killed those men without remorse.

And they were his own men. It was hard to believe that those savage pursuers were Snake's Head boys. It was incredible that they should so far forget themselves as to abjure their boasted sense of honor and drive their vengeance against a woman—and that woman Roxie Dawes!

The red figure, game in the face of the crowding menace, leaped to the fallen animal and snatched the rifle from its scabbard. Before it could be snapped to position, Jim Kates, dead shot, spurred forward, and, coincident with his screechy cat-squall, a dual report stammered from his gun. The rifle slipped to the ground, and the red fury, both wrists broken by Jim Kates' shots, reeled and fell, but was down for only a moment.

The fallen horse had struggled to its feet in the few seconds that embraced this swift drama. It was unhurt. The red rider, abandoning both rifle and six-gun, reached it in a couple of long leaps, went to saddle with a supple spring, and then, cleverly slipping out of the jaws of the nutcracker, turned and rode in a dead run straight across the park in a direct reversal of course, with the Snake's Head boys pounding along close in the rear.

Buck was far behind when he swung about to follow. Gringo was now limping badly; but he held stubbornly to the chase.

Of a sudden Buck saw a noose forward, like a thing alive, from the hand of the foremost of the pursuers. It went true to its mark, and the neck of the red rider was clasped in a choking grip of hemp. Then for a few swift seconds the air seemed alive with squirming ropes, and the fugitive was held helpless in the multiple snare.

Buck groaned, and in the same breath he swore wrathfully. A stumbling hoof, a faltering pace, be it ever so slight, could bring swift death; but there was no appreciable lagging in the gait of those galloping horses ahead.

Buck yelled and swore; but his voice could not penetrate that steady beat of hoofs. Captive and captors reached the lateral limit of the open space, and then were swallowed up by the dense grove of scrub cedars that stretched beyond.

A frightful dread beat in Buck's brain. He saw tragedy ahead—gruesome tragedy. The air was charged with it, dripped it. The mob spirit was aflame in the breasts of those turbulent riders, and the mob spirit is never satiated except with death—and always death in its most frightful form.

Buck pleaded with his crippled mount not to fail him now, to carry him on. The flagging pace in this crucial need maddened him. In frantic desperation he ripped Gringo's flesh cruelly with his spurs; but the faithful horse was far spent, and the stabbing pain of twisted tendons was rending his spirit.

He was giving all he had; he could give no more. His pace became slower and slower, in spite of Buck's relentless urging, and at last, just as the edge of the park was reached, he surrendered to the agony of racked flesh and went to his knees with a groan.

Buck vaulted from the saddle, and as he leaped he heard a yell behind him. He snatched a swift backward glance. A dozen horsemen were bearing down toward him.

He knew those riders. They were the Twisty Z men, and Roxie Dawes' father was leading them. Attracted by the shots in the brief scrimmage that had taken place on the opposite side of the flat, Dad Scroggs' forces had ridden out, fully mustered, to fend off an obvious invasion of the Twisty Z's domain.

BUCK visualized the frightful consequences of a meeting of the two forces. If they should come together, with Roxie Dawes in the hands of the wrathful Snake's Head men, a bloody feud would be precipitated, and death would stalk the range in a ghastly carnival.

Roxie Dawes must be rescued and hurried out of sight, and the impending clash averted. He did not know how this could be accomplished, with a battle already imminent; but a resolute urge snapped out of the dizzy turmoil in his brain and he responded punctually to the goad.

He abandoned his mount and plunged into the cedars. The Snake's Head men had left a plain trail along the twisted avenues of the close-shouldering grove, and he followed it at the ultimate of his speed. But his booted feet were leaden weights. He ran on stumblingly, as one runs in a nightmare, with a cold hand always pressing back.

He reached the edge of a narrow glade; then he faltered, swayed with a sickening sensation, and his heart stood still. On the opposite side of the opening a sudden group of men hooped in a red-skirted figure, hat on head and blue bandanna still masking the face—and the figure was swinging by a lariat from a high cedar limb!

After a second of numb horror, Buck's brain and sinew found coordinate action. His right hand whipped automatically to his holster, and, as he ran forward, three shots barked from his gun. They came in such quick succession that it was impossible to know which one went true; but one there was that bit the rope close to the limb over which it was thrown, and the red figure dropped like a plummet and lay in a heap on the ground.

Faces blanched when Buck came lunging forward.

"It's old Buck's haint!" one of the men screeched, as he leaped to saddle and spurred away in a frenzy of terror.

The others stood frozen to the spot, their staring eyes wide with amazement and unbelief. If it was not a spectre that had appeared in their midst, then one whom they had thought dead had come back to life.

"Old Buck's haint, your gray-headed granny!"

Buck smashed through the gaping crowd.

"It's old Buck himself, an' what he's goin' to do to you low down reptyles for bringin' harm to this here pore innercent girl——"

"Haw! haw! haw!"

Jim Kates guffawed sacrilegiously.

"Jes' listen at that! This here pore innercent girl! Then I reckon the pore innercent girl shore does need a shave real bad, Buck!"

"Hey?" Buck jerked the sombrero from the sagging head and ripped off the bandanna with a nervous snatch. "Why, great 'Hos'phat!" he gasped. "'Tain't Roxie a-tall!"

He gaped down at a blond mus-

tache, beneath which a pair of snarling lips were industriously muttering terrible blasphemies.

A voice brought him erect with a snap.

"What's goin' on here? What're you thievin' varmints up to?"

It was "Dad" Scroggs' voice, keen with anger and threat.

The Twisty Z riders came galloping across the narrow glade, with guns swinging menacingly. They drew sharp rein close to the startled Snake's Head group. A supple young woman in corduroy riding habit, her aggressively red hair tumbling loose from beneath a broad-brimmed white sombrero, leaped from her mount and was the first to crowd through the gaping circle.

"Roxie!" Buck gulped.

"You no-account Buck Green!" Roxie Dawes' voice palpitated high with indignation. "You no-account, worthless, sneakin'——"

Her hot tirade broke off into a dull cry. "Bogus Parks—and wearin' a dress. And it's my dress—my lovely new dress that was stole off the line before I even had a chance to wear it—and it's plumb ruined!"

She began to gush hysterical sobs.

"An' seems to me that's your grulla that's standin' over yander, ain't it, Roxie?" Buck queried through a series of nervous gulps.

Roxie jerked up her head. "My grulla! Sure that's my grulla!" She cried, her wrath rising. "And who's had the crust to sneak my hoss out o' the corral—and me huntin' all over creation for him?"

"Why—why," Buck said grop-ingly, "mebby 'tain't jes' the proper thing for me to tell about it, but——"

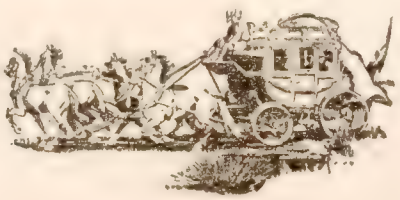
Then, in a few terse sentences, he related all that had happened.

"You ort to be strung up yourself for clippin' off that rope," Dad Scroggs rebuked him when the story was finished. "But—anyhow, come over and visit us often, boy," he supplemented in a friendly tone, gripping Buck's hand. "You'll be as welcome as the flowers in May."

"But Bogus," Buck floundered, "if he—why—him havin' a nice little bunch of his own——"

"Bogus be dad-burned!" Dad cut in, with a gusty oath. "If ever I ketch the sneakin' varmint snoopin' round Twisty Z again, they'll be a hemp party that won't end in a fizzle, like this 'un."

"O Buck! Dear, dear Buck!" Roxie gurgled between sobs, as she crept close. "Let's forget what's happened; and me—I ain't never goin' to treat you mean no more."



Loser Takes All

By Claude Rister

Texas—It wasn't winning the fight—but how it was won that counted

I RECKON I and Chub Megan must have rode about forty mile that day, and all because Chub wanted to take that yellow-haired Stallings girl to the tent show.

We got into Caliente just as old Sol was dropping behind the hills of Mexico, and I and Chub hit a bee line for the depot. Chub was in a awful hurry about then, for he didn't figure to lose no bets to Bob Dean, who was called The Fighting Cowboy.

Bob had sorter been nickering around Margy for a month or two, and with him having become a noted prize fighter, and with Margy being so strong for knuckle-jointers, things was looking bad for Chub.

We found Margy at the station, helping her dad with his work as station agent. Chub sidled right up to that filly took off his sombrero, and grinned like a danged possum.

"Margy," said he, and crumples his Stetson all out of shape. "Margy, I'm asking you to go with me to the tent show. What say?"

Margy she just smiled, with that catch-as-catch-can look in her pretty blue eyes, and says, innocent like:

"I'd be delighted, Chubby dear."

And just as old Chub was about to whoop for joy she added:

"If I hadn't already promised Robert Dean I'd go with him. He asked me first you know."

For a minute I thought Chub was going to bust. Holy cow! All that forty mile ride for nothing! His round face puffed and turned redder than a turkey gobbler's snoot; and all the time his hands kept opening and closing like he craved to choke somebody.

At last he slapped his sombrero down over his ears and stampeded for the door. I knowed he was going out where there was more cussin' room, so I figured I might as well go out and hear what he had to say. Chub had a mighty

fine, original flow of stuff when he wanted to cut loose with it.

Well, I and Chub went to the show anyway that night; but that sawed-off Irishman sure was looking for trouble. A gent wearing a checkered vest and a long, black coat, stopped us at the entrance and asked us where was our tickets. Chub screwed up his face until you could hardly see his little eyes, and says in a voice that sounded like crackling ice:

"I ain't got no ticket bub, and I don't need any. Here's my pass."

He patted his old forty-five, and as the party in the checkered vest didn't say nothing, we passed inside.

Chub swaggered down that aisle like a game rooster bragging around a bunch of hens, and I followed him. We was a sight. Dusty and everything. Chub didn't seem to care nothing about appearances though. I think he sorter wanted to look tough that night. Ain't it funny how a puncher acts when a girl puts vinegar in his honey?

Up close to the front—about three rows from the platform—I saw Margy Stallings. She was dressed in a blue cloud of soft, crinkly stuff, above which her yellow hair billowed and shone like them tumbled thunderheads you see banked in the west in early Junetime.

Bob Dean was by Margy's side, and the way that straw-headed rhinoceros leaned towards her and appropriated her with his eyes, made me want to spur him in the ears. Bob always seemed to have a smart-alec bossy kind of look about him that made a fellow feel that way.

There was some empty seats just behind Margy and Bob, and old Chub lined out for 'em, walking pigeon-toed, and trailing his long-shanked spurs across the desert floor like he didn't give a dang for nobody—which he didn't. He had just enough politeness left when he got there to stand aside and let me in first—but maybe that was because Margy was sitting next to the aisle.

I oozed in and lowered myself down behind Bob Dean. It was like squatting the other side of the mountain. I couldn't see a blamed wink. Chub flopped himself in back of Margy Stallings with a force that made the whole crazy row of seats rattle.

Margy was just whispering something to Bob, but when she felt that baby earthquake, she looked back. When she saw it was I and Chub, she smiled at us and nodded her pretty head. I cracked my face in a grin, but Chub, he just grunted and stared fishy-eyed, right on past her.

Purty soon the show started—juggling and card tricks at first—but Chub didn't pay no attention to these things. He just set there and gazed at the lemon-faced woman who was slickin' the cards, without seeming to see anything in particular.

After the card tricks, and the slight-of-hand, the sour looking woman backed off of the stage; whereupon an eagle-faced gent appears. He says that his name is Professor Julius Marlowe, and announces that he is ready and able to hypnotize anything that creeps, or stands on all-fours.

He inquires if they is anybody in the audience that wants to be his first victim. Ibbs Conroy and Jerry Anderson jumps up in the same breath, and to keep from disappointing either of them, he lets them both come up.

Talk about locoed hopper-toads! Holy cow! Even Chub's jaw dropped when he say Ibbs cavorting about the stage like a spring colt, and Jerry flopping his long arms and crowing like a banty rooster. That hypnotism stuff seemed to give Chub an idea, for he just set there during all the balance of the performance in a deep study.

Once in a while he would nod his head like he had something figured out, and once I would have swore I saw him grin. I didn't know what the kid had on his mind, but I was purty danged sure it had nothing to do with Sunday school.

As soon as the show was over, Chub

turned and whispered in my shell-like ear:

"Got it figured out, Sandy. See ye later."

And before I could open my mouth to say a word he had streaked out towards the stage and disappeared behind a flap of curtain that led up to where the actors stay.

WELL, as I didn't know nothing else to do, I moseyed over to Slim Garvin's place and ate a chili; after which I located a poker game down at Buck Gordon's livery stable, and there I bogged down for the rest of the night.

When the game finally ended I drug out a couple of saddle blankets and got a little shut-eye. It must have been summers around ten o'clock the next morning when I finally come out of the hay.

Chub Megan swooped down on me as soon as I hit the street.

"Wall-eyed wampus cats, Sandy!" he bawls. "Where the hell you been? I've look all over the range for you. Come on. We ain't got a minute to waste."

We was just passing Slim Garvin's place, when out comes old Bob Dean, steaming at the ears.

"Hold your hosses, you lowdown, bow-legged son of a cross-bred coyote. Professor Marlow told me what you said about me, and right here's where I dust off the trail with you."

I don't mind stating that I felt a little skittish—but not Chub. He took out his cigarette and blowed a cloud of smoke right under Bob's flat nose.

At that the so-called Fighting Cowboy went plum loco. He reached out with two big hams, got my pardner by the scruff of the neck and one shoulder, and yanked the kid clean off the earth. Then I went into action.

"Back up, Robert," says I, poking him in the guts with my persuader. Bob wasn't afraid of course, but — well he was born not far from Caliente, and he still had respect for the particular kind of ordnance old man Colts builds.

He let go Chub's collar, and all the time his deep chest was working up and down, up and down.

"All right, Sandy Pickins," he says, giving me a blistering look.

"You hold the winning hand right now—but just wait. This game ain't half played yet. My time is coming, and when it does I'm going to take you two smart-alecs and bust your heads together so dad-gigged hard you'll both be mushroomed!"

"Talk is cheap," says Chub, and keeps right on grinning, which is unnatural for him, seeing that somebody is itching for a fight. I didn't *sabe* the kid at all. In fact, I was beginning to think maybe grieving over Margy Stallings had drove him loco.

"They's a nest of mighty bad hombres in this town," growls Bob, "and I'm the whole danged brood. If your long-legged jackass of a friend will lay off for about two minutes I'll twist you into a corkscrew before you can say keeno."

Chub rolled another cigarette. "Listen, grub-worm," he drawls, slow and casual. "I've been craving to whup you for a mighty long time, but I haven't had no public opportunities until now. I wouldn't have been satisfied less'n it was public, *sabe?* I want the citizens of this here *pueblo* to know that you ain't no fighting cowboy at all, but just a great big balloon—full of bluff. I've waited a mighty long time for my chance, but I reckon they ain't no need for me to procrastinate no longer."

Chub stepped up to Bob, and the smile was gone from the kid's face. He jabbed a stubby thumb into Bob's side and kind of croaks:

"You think you're one tough baby, don't you? Well, listen here, son. You ain't half as hard as I am. Down where I come from the grasshoppers wear boots and spurs, and the butterflies pack bowie knives. I'm personally so dog-goned rough you can shred diamonds on the back of my neck. Want to fight, huh? All right, hard-face. We'll let the

town in on it. We'll get Zeb Wrenfield to let us fight it out with them sparring gloves, up there in front of the whole push tonight. Are you game?"

Bob couldn't believe his ears at first —no more than I could. "Why—why, you pot-gutted wiggletail," he gurgled. Then he busted out into a harsh laugh. But I know he wasn't tickled. All the time his eyes was dancing like two little blue flames, and there was something in that laugh of his that I didn't like.

"Son," says he. "I ain't got but one request to make."

"Figure it granted, for it's the last you'll ever make," chirruped my pardner.

"I want Margy Stallings to be there and—"

"You're wasting a request," Chub told him. Them details has already been attended to. I figured you'd be silly enough to accept my challenge, so I've already reserved a couple of seats on the very front row. She's the very one I wanted to convince."

WHEN Bob Dean had slouched through the door of Slim Garvin's chili parlor, Chub Megan threw back his head and laughed fit to kill. "It worked!" he whoops with joy, then laughs some more.

"Worked!" I yowls. "Worked! Son if you've got any work to do you'd better look after it today, for by this time tomorrow you'll be settin' on a cloud, pluckin' hard strings."

"I was just running a flam-doozle, Sandy," Chub explained. "I only wanted to get him riled. The prof and me worked this all out last night."

"Chub," I says, stern and reproachful. "You're as nutty as a peach orchard pig. Bob will put his foot on your neck and pull your head off."

Chub just laughed, then he told me his secret. It seems that after he left me he had gone up and braced the professor about that hypnotism stuff. The "prof" told Chub that for fifty bucks he would teach him to hypnotize anything from a bullfrog to a college president.

Chub had took the lessons, and now my pardner had gone and contracted for six foot of earth, and didn't know it. At least that's the way I felt about it. I didn't have much confidence in Chub's ability to put Bob Dean to sleep.

"Supposin' something goes wrong?" I argued. "You're staging this thing to make a monkey out of Bob before Margy Stallings. Now if you didn't hypnotize Bob, and—"

"Aw, hell, Sandy!" Chub cut in, irritated. "Don't be a hoot-owl. They ain't nothing *can* happen. Of course if I didn't know it would work I wouldn't try it. The prof has had me up there at the tent all morning, practicing up. He says I'm the dangdest hombre he ever seen when it comes to hypnotism. Natural gift, he calls it. I even hypnotized the prof hisself while he was giving me the lessons. Of course I figured the prof might be faking, just to get my dinero, so he called in Zeb Wrenfield and Tom Atkins, and I done the same with them. In less than three shakes I had 'em all acting like a bunch of locoed ganders with the rash."

"But even if it works," I says, "it wouldn't be no fair fight. If you hypnotize this big hunk of cement he won't be nothing but a helpless booby."

Chub smiles at me in pity. "Sandy," he says, "that shows what you don't know about hypnotism. You see, once you get the subject in your power—subsidy to your will, the prof calls it—he becomes just what you tell him to. No more, no less. Now, you see the idy is this: I hypnotize Bob and take from his skill with them gloves. He's the same as ever except for that, *sabe?* Just as strong and active, but he don't know a danged thing about boxing. That will cut him down to my size so's we can fight it out for Margy Stallings, fair and square. It ain't a fair test otherwise, him being a prize-fighter. Bob's a lot huskier than me, but if he can lick me, man-to-man and toe-

to-toe, then I ain't got a word to say."

"But Chub," I argues, "ain't they some other way?"

"No!" he cuts in. "Margy is all tied up in that bull because she thinks he's a prize-fighter, and I've got to show her he ain't nothing except a dancing master."

IT had flew all over town that Chub and Bob was to fight at the show, and it being Saturday night, they was a powerful crowd there to see it. When the card tricks had all been played and the hypnotism was finished, that Professor Marlow come out in front of the curtain and says:

"Ladies and gentlemen," he says, "we have with us tonight, two local celebrities who have kindly consented to engage in a boxing match for your approval. I take pleasure in introducing to you"—he looked down at Bob and crooked his trigger finger; Bob stood up—"Mr. Robert Grigsby Dean, better known to the pugilistic world as The Fighting Cowboy."

Bob ducked his gourd, chiefly towards Margy Stallings, and grinned like a big ape.

The prof he turned to where Chub was nestling by Mary's side, and lifted the kid with the mere wiggle of a snaky eyebrow. "And this, ladies and gentlemen," he says, "is Mister Terrence Megan of the Star Bar ranch."

Chub got up and bobbed his fat head, while them fuzzy-faced coyotes back in the crowd howled, and pounded the floor, and hollered things at Chub and Bob until they both turned red and looked sorter hacked.

The professor asked Bob who he wanted for referee. Bob 'lowed he didn't give a dang; so the prof turned to Chub with the same question.

The kid says: "Well, Mister Marlow, you can give me Sandy Pickins. He's strong as a burro, and it's going to take just that kind of an hombre to pull me off this so-called Fighting Cowboy, once I start striking."

The people out front hollered louder than ever. The prof winked at Chub, and the kid winked back.

"Very well, then," the Professor says, lifting his voice so's the squawkers could hear. "Mister Sandy Pickins, also of the Star Bar ranch, will referee the bout. I thank you, ladies and gentlemen."

He bowed and sidled off the rostrum. A second curtain went up, exposing a rope corral, and I and Chub, and the so-called Fighting Cowboy, climbed onto the platform and got down to business.

After the blobs had been tied on, and everything, I stepped back near the ropes and says:

"Are you ready, Chub?"

"Rearing to go!" he sparkles.

"Ready, Bob Dean?"

That big leather-head just wet his chops like a hungry lobo and growls: "Pulling at my chain, son."

"Go!" I yelled; and they locked horns.

I FIGURE to live to a mighty old age, but I don't never expect to forget the things that happened within the next ten minutes. When I bawled "Go!" Bob Dean just crouched down and quivered like a mountain cougar, eager for a spring. For a minute I didn't think the kid had any more chance than an honest Greaser—if they was such an animal—would have in Mexico. I started to shut my eyes to keep from seeing what I figured was bound to happen; but just then I saw Bob's jaw drop and his eyes bug out until you could have roped 'em with a grape vine.

When I looked at Chub, I reckon my jaw sagged a little, too, for I hadn't never seen my pardner go through with no such monkey shines as he was cutting now.

Chub approached Bob, slow and cautious; wiggling his thick eyebrows, and glaring, and sticking out his short chin like a bunny hen looking for doodlebugs. Bob sure did look funny—curious, and flabbergasted all at once—but

I figured that was on account of him feeling Chub's black magic.

Chub, he must have figured that way too, for now he grinned and showed his teeth, like I had seen the Professor do, and sprung at Bob with both hands stuck straight out in front of him. "Ha!" he barks.

Bob's eyes squinted down and shimmered. He just straightened up and propped his big fists on his hips and looked murder at Chub.

"Say, what the hell is the matter with you, anyway?" he rasps.

Chub reached over, walled his eyes, and commenced making little quick, short jabs at Bob's face. The gophers out front, seeing all this, thought Chub was only sparring around, like fighters do, and they whooped and hollered for Bob to hop in and mix it up.

By this time Chub was right near to Bob, and he throwed out his hands, wiggled the mitts tied to 'em, and sorter hissed:

"Zambo! Br-r-r-ambo! You're now in my power! You ain't no more of a fighter than I am, *sabe?* You're still as strong as ever, but you danged lop-eared mule, you don't know nothing at all about the gloves. From hence on I am your master. Put up your hands, you wallop-faced burro! I'm going to give you the larruping of your whole blamed life!"

Bob's face went red—then pale. "Mule, huh?" he gulps and gurgles, and his upper lip sorter trembles and moves up, showing his teeth. I figured that Bob was sure enough in Chub's power and that he was now fighting to throw off the black magic—but we all make mistakes.

"Well, son, they ain't nothing kicks harder than a mule!" Bob suddenly explodes, and with that, he crashed into Chub's face like a pile-driver, sending the poor kid clawing and gasping into a far corner of the corral.

Talk about blood carnivals! Holy cow! I reckon even the old-timers of Caliente hadn't never seen anything like that fight. The fighters forgot all about that round business.

After the first wallop, Chub saw that the hypnotism stuff was off, so he got up from the floor, fighting like a coyote with hydrophoby.

The kid sure put up a nasty scrap—biting and kicking, and swinging his fists so hard and fast that ol' Bob kissed the stage floor three or four times. You see Chub's spurs give him quite an advantage.

In the clenches he would spur Bob in the shins, then when the so-called Fighting Cowboy's hands would drop, Chub would pelt him in the jaw. Bob was too much for the kid though, and finally he chugged one to the kid's chin so dad-burned hard that my pardner's legs just seemed to wilt under him.

I bent over Chub and counted to about forty. Finally I announced to the herd that the fight was postponed until sometime later—then the curtain dropped, and the show was ended.

I GOT down on my hunkers and lifted Chub's head. Bob Dean was standing in one corner of the corral rubbing his shins. The blood was running from his mouth and nose, and from a big gash under his right eye—where Chub had bit him, most likely. The professor wasn't nowhere in sight, so I figured it was up to me to coax old Chub back to the land of the living.

About that time I heard a pitiful kind of sound—like the westwind sighing through the gloomy chaparrals on a lonely night—and I turned to see Margy Stallings standing back near the stage scenery, her face white, and one little slender hand pressed to her bosom. Her eyes were big and fluid at first, but when she looked over at Bob Dean, them eyes hardened into little glass marbles, and she flashed:

"You beast! You gorilla! You—you coward! To think that you would take advantage of your animal strength to do a thing like this! Oh, how I hate you!"

Old Bob was so surprised he nearly lost his pins. Margy's eyes went fluid again, and old Bob turned and sulked away, disappearing down one of them little scenic trails that led from the stage.

"Oh, Sandy! Is—is he badly hurt?" croons Margy, bending over Chub.

"Well, it's time he was saying good morning," I answers, and I reckon she could tell by my voice that I was beginning to feel a little worried.

"But—but!" she sorter gasps. "We mustn't let him die! I—I—Oh, Sandy! I love him!. I'm going for the doctor!" and before I could say a word she had galloped away.

Finally old Chub come back to life, set up, and dug the cobwebs from his eyes. "Sandy," he says, when he is able to speak, "I'm going to kill me a professor."

"Don't blame the prof," I says. "Come on, be a sport."

"Sport hell!" Chub snaps. "That Professor Harlow is a danged fake. He paid Zeb Wrenfield and all the rest of them galoots to act loco. After I left you up town this morning I meandered off down here, and I heard the prof and that checker-vested guy tipping Bob Dean off to the whole thing. The prof and Checkers was mad because we got in last night without paying any fare. They advised Bob to act hypnotized until I got careless; then to cut loose and knock me clean acrost the Rio Grande."

"And you went into that corral knowing all this?" I questions him severely.

"Yes," he growls. "I figured that maybe in acting hypnotized he'd get a little careless hisself. But that ain't neither here nor there," he concludes, getting to his feet and reaching for his gun. "It's the prof I want to commune with."

Then I opened up and told Chub all about Margy.

"The hell you bawl out!" says Chub, surprised.

"Yes," I tells him. "That's the way it worked out. Just the opposite to what you and Bob figured it would."

Chub stood there and thought for a minute, then he throwed back his head and laughed. "We beat 'em, Sandy," he gloats. "The prof, and Checkers, and Bob, all combined. They won the fight all right, but it don't get 'em nowhere. It's a case of loser take all, I reckon."

Just then Margy came in, dragging Doc Pilcher along after her. When she saw Chub standing there, battered and bloody, but still alive, she roped him with her arms and commenced crying on his shirt front. I could see by the look on Chub's face that about fifty per cent of the party wasn't necessary, so I took Doc Pilcher by the arm and we went for a stroll.

"Battling for Life in the Barren Lands"

WORD has just reached the outside that two men, J. Critchell-Bullock and Jack Hornby, successfully spent an entire winter in the Barren Lands of northern Canada—the first white men to accomplish this perilous undertaking.

Living in a treeless, barren waste, they "denned up" in a hole in a sand hill where they passed the extreme cold weather. They lived very largely on the fat of foxes and wolves. At the present time they are on their way across the northern plains by canoe, traveling by the Thelon River system to Hudson's Bay, where they will endeavor to connect with a trading schooner into civilization. They commenced their journey via Edmonton, Alberta, wintering at Casba Lake, three hundred miles northeast of Fort Resolution, on the Great Slave Lake.

Critchell-Bullock and Hornby, two true adventurers of the trail, have hung another banner to the honor of the white race.

When Good Fellows
Get Together
This is the get-together corner for our readers. If you are searching for a pal, if you are letter-hungry, or if you are seeking an opportunity, address your fellow readers through this department. There's no charge, these pages are free to all. Write today to the Editor, North-West Stories, 461 Eighth Ave., New York City.

This is the second issue containing our new Service Department for our readers. As the August issue goes to the great pounding presses, the July number containing our first appearance of "When Good Fellows Get Together" will not have reached your hands. As a consequence, correspondence from our readers cannot have been received, nor printed until your next issue of North-West Stories. This is with the exception of three or four requests for ad insertions of lost pals into "The Port of Missing Men."

In order that we may keep the aims and opportunities of this Service Department before you, we have herewith printed suggestions and information on the various divisions of the Department and how you may benefit from these columns.

Read, Act, Write—Today. Our slogan is: "Find Your Man." Here is how it can be done:

Opportunity Seekers

Jobs will be located for men wishing to hit the trails of adventure and romance under the open sky. Able, virile men will be discovered and placed for expeditions. If you have red, pounding, restless blood, here is your chance. Write and tell us your wants and your hopes.

If you are searching for a pal who will stand by you through thick and thin, through fair weather and foul, he will be the type to read these pages, address this division and "Find Your Man."

The Mail Pouch

Would you be glad to hear from some man or woman of the great West or the Far North? Are you marooned on the far-flung rim of the West or Northwoods with a desire to correspond with some person in civilization? This column is for you, it will bring you friends.

Rambler's Roost

Are you a vagabond of the trail — or would you like to be one? This is the nook where ramblers, globe-trotters and adventurers meet, find old friends and new, spin their yarns, get new information for fresh courses and hit the unblazed trails to romance. Here the desert rat can smoke it over with Northwoodsmen or the cowboy and in turn each of these can meet their other friends from other lands.

You can discover new wild-life canoeing courses to unknown parts, the last provisioning points to uninhabited desolated places. Where you may go in a specified length of time and how to get

there. Be you the lone trailer or the commander of an expedition, we will help you "Find Your Man" and make the trail a bit easier for you. All we ask is that you remember that this is *not* a tourist proposition for locating summer resorts nor watering places, the tourist agencies will take care of those, but a service for men—virile, red-blooded men, who want to hit the hard-bitten trails of adventure, trails off the main roads and channels of civilization. If this interests you, write today—remember the service is free.

The Trading Post

One of man's oldest joys is that of trading or swapping. Our forefathers traded tobacco to the Indians for a good horse, a cow or a saddle in the old days. To swap is one of the genuine pleasures of human nature, why not get in on the fun?

Perhaps you have a pair of spurs that you would swap for a pair of snow-shoes to hang on your cabin wall or some other curio. Have you a dog team harness you'd swap for an old saddle for a decoration—or a good one for use? Curios, photographs, furs, hides, maps, books of the country, rare documents—anything at all, here then is your chance, this is *your* Department —why not make use of it?

You radio enthusiasts may have something in common—you away up there in the Yukon, do you want to correspond with some cowboy in the Far West and get the dope on some particular place, or the most distant point that has been picked up in that sector? Address the Trading Post. Parts to swap, information to talk over, here is your opening. We recently heard that an airplane set that is to be used by the MacMillan Arctic expedition this summer was heard from Guam and Panama while being tried out at Anacosta, District of Columbia, a short while back. Lieutenant D. C. Palmer, the pilot, expects great things from this new one hundred pound equipment. It is a five kilowatt tube set. Have you anything to remark on this?

Sports West and North

Have you some questions that you would like to ask the Northwoodsman on his own field of sports, something that you would like to incorporate into your community? Perhaps the Western cowboy has some ideas on his sports that would be appealing to you. Possibly you have some interesting ideas on new methods of shooting the rapids in a canoe or you can tell your brother reader something on where to get good animal photographs and how best to get them. If there is anything in the line of sports that you would like to ask or talk over with Good Fellows, here is your chance.

The Corral

This is the catch-all for everything unusual and different. If you have equipment and knowledge for a North-country trek but lack the money to start, then here is the division wherein you may connect with some reputable man with the funds and get under way. If the red blood of adventure runs deep and fast in your veins and you have no outlet for it, you may make up for the lack of money and experience in willingness and good fellowship on the trail and through these columns "Find Your Man" that will see you through to happy days.

The Port of Missing Men

How about that lost pal or acquaintance that you haven't seen for many years and that you would like to hear from? Run an ad for him between the pages of North-West Stories—there is a chance that you may find him. If he is a vagabond of the trail and a true adventurer he will be attracted by these pages and see your ad. Remember the

service is free, write us the details today and we will see to it that all possible is done to "Find Your Man."

We herewith offer the first contributions:

"I would like to hear from some of my old pals of the A. E. F. days. "Fatty" Coleman, Kitchener, Brock and the rest of the old crowd please note. Won't you please write to a lonely pal who is very desirous of hearing from all of you.

Address: Charles H. Horlbeck,
Care *North•West Stories.*"

"Captain Jack McGilchrist Ross, Yacqui Indian fame, what has become of you? How about writing to that right-hand quartermaster of yours 'Slim' Puddle? Several letters have been sent you care the American Consul at Guaymas, Sonora, but returned. Time and tide have changed artisanships but the esteem of friendship still rings true. Please write.

Address: 'Slim' Puddle,
Care *North•West Stories.*"

"Paul J. Foley, 'rogue of the road,' last heard from in coal mines of Illinois if still living please write your old friend 'Uge, now leaving on Greenland sea voyage.

E. F. E.
Please write care *North•West Stories.*"

California calls to some one needing the big open spaces:

"Partner Wanted:

I am looking for a partner to join me in the bee business. Not much capital required. It is a job for some one not very strong who is longing for outdoor life. Work will be a little lonesome and not much more than a living but there are a number of good places in the hills out here where we can locate.

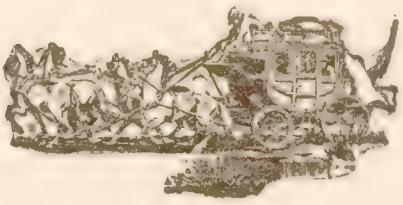
Will answer all inquiries and give all the information I can.

Joe Drysdale,
Care General Delivery,
Sacramento, California."

"Swallow, Walter E. You are forgiven; come home at once. Write to mother as soon as you see this notice. I must see you; my heart is breaking.—Mrs. Minnie E. Swallow, 51 Lancaster Street, Providence, R. I."

Let Us Help You "Find Your Man"—today.

ADVENTURE, ROMANCE AND FREEDOM beckon you—will you answer the call?



Tropic Lands in the Heart of the Northwoods

Recently we published the following startling article:

Romance Calls in the Yukon

"A subtropical valley in Northern British Columbia, just south of the Yukon Territory border, fringed in with glaciers and perpetual snows, is to be colonized next year by wealthy Vancouver, British Columbia, sportsmen and mining men, according to S. C. Scotte, the discoverer, who was in the city today after spending three years there.

"The valley is four hundred and eighty miles inland, almost inaccessible, and contains abundant game," said Mr. Scotte. "The temperature never gets below zero and freezing temperature is rare. Grass, hay, berries and wild fruits grow in profusion. It is about twenty miles long and two or three miles wide.

"I encountered several species of wild animals never seen before. The most curious was a large white deer weighing about six hundred pounds. It had a horn on one side of the head. A series of hot springs on one side of the valley are responsible for the mild winters and long pleasant summers. The soil is very fertile."

One of the replies it brought is herein quoted verbatim:

The Answering Call

I was interested in an article in your magazine entitled, "Romance Calls in the Yukon," which referred to a colonization project in a tropical valley in Northern British Columbia. Would like to know more about it, as I am planning to go to British Columbia in the spring of 1926 and would be grateful for any information any reader can give.

R. E. Y.

Now comes the accurate information direct from that land of mystery and romance, by De Herries Smith, to whom we are grateful for the clearing up of this thrilling riddle:

Stranger Than Fiction

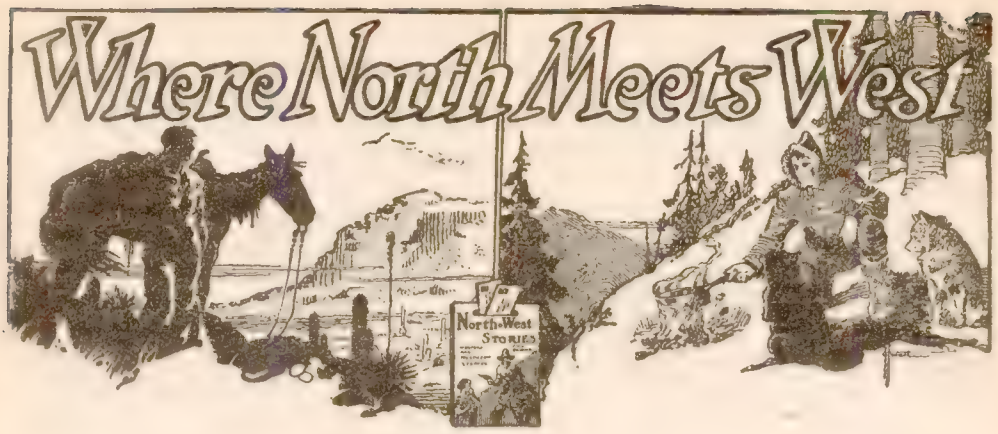
The existence of a tropical valley in far northern British Columbia has been a favorite theme of the Yukon and Nahanni Indians for the past fifty years. These natives, crossing the Rockies to trade at Fort Laird and other fur posts on the Mackenzie River, brought word of a valley in the hills, where it was green all the year round.

An old Hudson's Bay Company man, who is a particular friend of mine, remembers having heard this story over thirty years ago at Fort Nelson, but put it down as an Indian yarn. Frank Perry, mining engineer of Vancouver, British Columbia, then came on it. There he found unbounded mineral wealth, animals so fat that they could only wobble, and trees and plants growing to an enormous size.

Later S. C. Scotte, also of Vancouver, penetrated to these hills and made a similar report—so, regardless of its mystery, there is apparently some truth in it.

Perry claims to have found mountains of copper, silver and other minerals. He succeeded in interesting capitalists in Eastern Canada, and before this appears in print, a large hydroplane will have gone in.

For over a month it has been waiting at Sitka, Alaska. The journey by air is expected to be accomplished in a few hours—otherwise the only mode is to walk, accompanied by pack dogs. The plane carries in engineers and stakers and it is a foregone conclusion that after they have made several trips, that all the minerals will be staked. This is not a poor man's game and until more is known of this terrain from much experience in the north, I should advise R. E. Y. to stay away. The journey on foot requires several months and the flying machine will carry only the company's officials.



In this Department you will find each month, short articles by the authors on their own personal experiences in gathering their story material and things that from time to time we obtain that are of interest about the writers. Our authors are stationed in almost every corner of the West, North, and East.

Their travels take them through thrilling adventure into the great Northwoods, the glamor and lure of mystery out under the big open bowl of all outdoors, beside the campfire with its romance and color of the picturesque Western cowboy. They wend their way over mystifying mesquite-flung trails and poke their heads into the narrow mountain passes of the North where the booming waterfall is the only noise audible to the ear and the odor of the pine needles and fir bring fragrance to the nostrils.

Here, you can meet the North or the West face to face and enjoy the personal words of the men who have been there and seen—men who are happy to tell you of "their" country and why it is theirs, and the reasons why to them it is the *only* place to live Here, authors can get acquainted with one another and get a view on each other and their workmanship. If you, Reader, have any remarks that you would like to make on the stories that you read between these pages, if you would like to ask any questions of our authors about their stories, or the lands about which they write, here is your opportunity to get first-class authentic information free of charge. Write to your favorite author today, care North•West Stories, 461 Eighth Avenue, New York, N. Y.

In Ungava Far Away

Your first story this month is "Flame of the Snow," by Stanley Shaw. Here is a man who has hiked it, slept, hunted and lived in the Northland for long periods at a time. His splendid books of that country are known to thousands and have brought credit and romance to the big Northwest. Of this country around which he draws the web of romance and adventure he says:

"Twenty years ago," states Mr. Shaw, "all that vast territory west of Hudson's Bay and known as Ungava—an Eskimo word meaning far away—was considered a place where only a handful of Indians, breeds and an occasional French trapper could live. Today, men know better; up beyond that great white frontier, increasing numbers of adventurous souls push each year to find the wild and the primitive; to hunt, not only for bear, moose, deer and wolf, but to probe a virgin land for things far more precious—gold, silver and copper. To illustrate: one such man offered me, not long ago, a proven silver mine up there—undeveloped, of course—for less than $2,000. Another man, with more courage, or spare cash, than I, bought it. Last summer, he took out enough of the white metal to return him his investment five times over.

"Many people read stories of this country and believe them to be of things long past;

like the tales of our own wild Western plains. This view is entirely wrong; save for the cold winters, the life in Northern Canada today closely approximates that of our own frontier of fifty years ago; less lawless, thanks to the highly efficient Northwest Police Patrol, but offering the man who goes there an equal spice of high adventure and discovery.

"In my own stories of Canada, there has been very little that was not founded on fact, colored with romance, of course, names changed and incidents twisted in the way of all tale weavers, but, usually with a basis of true life incident at the bottom. To the humble mind of this writer, at least, that is the one and only way to get real human-interest stuff—make it really real.

"Sincerely,
STANLEY SHAW."

"A Swath of Gold!"

Nels Leroy Jorgensen has given us something of a treat in "Tony" Wheeler who walks through the pages of North• West in a rip-snorting bang-up fashion that is a joy to the heart. "Vultures of the Gulf" carries you right down into the old Southwest. Of his country, meaning that of which he has written, he says:

"'Vultures of the Gulf' is the outcome of a desire to do something like it for a long time. I know the border country fairly well; but it wasn't until I'd left it thousands of miles and several years behind me, that a map showed me how easily smuggling could be done across the Gulf. From then on, it was but a step into my plot and story.

"The border country intrigues me. I am in the belief that every writer has some one complex which guides the fashioning of his work. Mine is color. And down there, there is color! I prefer to see in retrospect, sunlight like a swath of gold across a painter's canvas, green-splashing growth, white and red and orange patternings against the sky, when I write.

"For other writers there is the beauty near at hand. For some the moods of the sea. That's theirs. Mine is color; and it is therefore probable that I'm going to be painting my word pictures of that border country for as long as editors encourage my writing by occasional acceptances of my stuff.

"Take that as a warning or not—as you will!

"With best regards,
JORGENSEN."

"Have You Been Fighting?"

"Son of the North" *is* a real son of the North. Evan Merritt Post is of the North and might himself be termed a son of the North, that is the reason why he writes with conviction. Cardigan is a real man from a real man's country—Alaska, and Cardigan has a part to play and he plays it with no mediocre interest. We expect great things of Mr. Post. Here are a few lines about the "Son of the North" from one whom you know:

"Hello, Pardner!

"You'll laugh when I tell you how 'A Son of the North' originated. I laugh myself. The germ of the yarn dates back to a certain day when, as a youngster in the seventh grade of a country school up in the wilds of New Hampshire, I took one of the beatings of my life. That fellow whaled the tar out of me, almost closed both my eyes, and then walked home with our girl.

"Of course, as you have guessed, he was bigger'n me. Well, that lickin' hurt—in more ways than one. When Pa saw me that evening, he looked sort of funny, and asked: 'Have you been fighting?'

"When I told him I had, he asked: 'What did you do to the other fellow? It looks as though he'd done a whole lot to you.'

"And when I told him 'nothin',' which was the truth, he said:

"'I don't like to have you fight, son, but if you've got to, I wish to goodness you'd do better than that.'

"But that wasn't the worst of it. I lost my girl because she was young and foolish and liked the fellow she was in love with to win all his fights, which of course was foolish.

"Well, from that day on, I swore that I'd grow up to be a big bruiser so I could lick everybody in the whole, whole world—if I wanted to. Well, that's a joke. If I'm a big bruiser, then the Rock of Gibraltar is a pebble. That's the irony of life, friends. The nearest I got to being a big bruiser was a hundred and fifty-five when I'm sopping wet, and five feet eight above ground.

"The only fellows I can lick successfully are either cripples or are in the home for the aged. No foolin'. So to get even with nature, I decided I'd write a story, see, and have the hero a swell fighter, and play I was the hero, and the other bird was that big stiff who licked me and then stole my girl back in grammar-school days. Sort of a vicarious way of getting even with that fellow who stole my girl, understand?

"Every fellow has his ambition, and that was mine. And then, when I rambled up into Alaska last spring, I heard from an old-timer of just such a fellow as Cardigan. I couldn't help wishing I was Cardigan, when I had heard of all he'd done, and so—I wrote the yarn. Playing I was the hero was lots of fun, honest, because I guess it's about the only way I'll ever get to be one. An' I got real excited in places.

"Well, I've got to hit the fiction trail now. So-long, fellows.

EVAN MERRITT POST."

"The Indian's Secret"

From the purple hills of California we receive news from U. Stanley Aultman on the origin of the "Black Scar Trail." No doubt you are quite well acquainted with Kowanche, the Indian, by now and are looking forward to seeing him with an equal amount of pleasure. Here is Mr. Aultman now:

"Picture an old Indian stooped with the load of nearly a hundred years, whose bronze-colored face is deeply seamed and whose high cheek bones protrude from his brow, like poles pushed against the inside of a floppy tent, and you have before your visionary mind the likeness of a man with whom I used to spend many an evening hour.

"This old boy lives in the state of New Mexico. I should like to give you his name and address, friends, but justified selfishness prevents me from doing so. I have a little book in my possession filled with plot germs that I extracted from the heart of this old fossil, and I hope to turn those plots into cold dollars before some other writer beats me to it. See the point?

"'Plot germs' I said—but no germ is interesting until is is magnified, and but few things are interesting in the raw. 'Black Scar Trail' is but a germ, enlarged by imagination and clothed in words. My friend, the Indian, furnished the germ and I the adornments.

"In the story, it will be remembered, when asked why the scar was black, Kowanche answered: 'That is the Indian's secret.' At that particular point in the yarn it would have been out of place, I believe, to have explained that when the juice or sap from a certain specie of cactus is applied to a raw burn or flesh wound of any kind it adds to the pain, prevents the wound from healing rapidly, and leaves a black scar.

"Yours danged sincerely,

U. S. AULTMAN."

Brothers of the Range

Clee Woods is not unknown to the readers of Fiction House. This stolid writer of the great American West has given us many a thrill, although none much better than have "The Riders of the Night Range." If you haven't read that yarn, don't miss it, friends, it's *there.*

"'Riders of the Night Range' had its inception in the fact that I like to write what I call 'brother' stories, in which one brother suffers and sacrifices for another, as I tried to show in 'Cow Country Stuff,' recently published in ACTION STORIES, and in *'Flying Hoofs,' lately released by Universal Pictures Corporation.*

"This type of story appeals to me strongly because I have lived through some of its emotional experiences with a brother of mine whom I lost in the World War.

"In 'Riders of the Night Range' I have given fictitious names to an actual setting in the Black Range Mountains of New Mexico, with slight changes of topography. This locale, of all the many I have known throughout the country, is my favorite. 'Devil Sam' Bragg is an actual character whom I have known, shaggy whiskers and all. His real name is not Bragg and he never was a rustler, but he did earn the title of 'Devil Sam' and is known by that sobriquet to this day.

"Yours cordially,

CLEE WOODS."

Hitting the High Spots

"Crossed Trails" are really crossed trails until you finish the story, and once you start you won't stop until you do finish it—we promise you that. You readers have not heard a great deal about our recent friend, Mr. Lée Willenborg, so as a consequence we want him to spin a few ropes around his life and put same before you. Let 'er go:

"The editor, by the most subtle hints has indicated that he wants the 'high spots' in my life, set down. There is positively no accounting for tastes, is there?

"Quite freely I admit that the world lost something when I entered the 'litry' field. But not nearly so much as I did. The chap with whom I started in business, now has four motor cars, two chins, and an income tax that almost equals my earnings. The business was a flop as long as I was in it. When I got out it prospered. No, there is no moral to this. But I'd rather be poor and handsome, than rich and homely like he is. One can't have everything.

"One day I said: 'I will be an artist and paint loveliness!' Great idea! For five years I toiled under the lash of more or less vitriolic-minded masters. That all happened years ago; but the effect is still apparent. Whenever things get snarled-up with disappointment I say to myself:

"'Remember, old one, you went through art school' and that cheers me up at once. I recall a portrait of my mother (that I painted during this era) that one of her friends took for the Pope. Nearsighted? That's very nice of you to excuse it that way; thanks so much!

"I live in a small town, because I like it; enjoy golf; prefer Scotch (if any); am married. White (in complexion); have no politics; and love to go fishing. Aside from that am just an ordinary fellow. And I hope you will like my stuff because I need the money.

"Yours,
LEE WILLENBORG."

"Roaring East from Montana"

"Pizen Hart" sure has a dangerous soundin' name, but, after all, he has his good qualities and no mistake. Perhaps it will be well for friend Eric Swain to take out some life insurance; what do you think after reading these lines from the writer?

"The background of 'Pizen Hart' is that transitional period during which the open range gave way to far flung boundary lines of wire, which in turn surrendered to the compact many corralled beef factory with much of the hard work of pitching alfalfa for the stuffing of blocky Herfords, and little of the hard riding and hard living of the days of the long horn.

"Incidentally, if a certain relative of mine whose years total more than three score and ten, and whose bulk lacks a scant twenty of three hundred pounds, penetrates the thin disguise of slightly altered names, I am convinced he will tuck the well worn Colt which once draped the slender hips of 'Drowsy Winn' into an already bulging waist band, desert his comfortable Montana porch, and come roaring East to deal with the miscreant who dared to 'make a story of him'!

"Here's hoping I've told the yarn at least half as interestingly as it came to me.

"Cordially yours,
ERIC SWAIN."

Yarning Sourdoughs

Frank Richardson Pierce doesn't need any introduction, you all know him. He has a laugh for you in this book, if you haven't already found him, it's in "Brown Eyes and Brown Bear." So, if you ever go hunting, remember the philosophy behind this yarn—the truth comes in various forms and there is much in fiction. From the rugged coast of Washington comes the following letter from Mr. Pierce:

"About 'Brown Eyes and Brown Bear.' As I recall the yarn came about in this manner. I was on my annual trip to Alaska gathering material and slipped down into the steerage where I had a number of old friends from various Alaskan towns. All were sourdoughs and as usual were yarning. One of them got to boasting about how good he was and when once he got warmed up to the subject of hunting bears, he sure was good.

"He wound up by spinning a portion of the tale around which 'Brown Bear, etc.' was built.

"Am hopping down to California for three weeks, then back at the grind again. I am selling, on an average, of eight short stories a month these days and it sure keeps me hopping.

"S'long,

PIERCE."

Campfire and Desert

Flagstaff, Arizona, has things other than sand and cactus; it has some real-time cowboys and some genuine Western excitement. We think that Harrison Conrard has rounded some up and put them down on paper so that you can get the benefit of them. "The Red Rider" is one *Western* yarn.

"Perhaps you will like 'The Red Rider.' Perhaps you will also like 'Buck' Green. I hope so. I myself like Buck immensely, for he and I grew up together and he has always been a mighty loyal friend to me. He's one of those good old-time Arizona cowboys —with erratic ways, of course, like many of us—but he's genuine and a good scout in his rough-and-ready way.

"He has blundered into many a fool scrape in his eventful life, but he always managed to pull out with a whole skin. He has told me many of his stirring, and sometimes amusing, experiences as we sat together at a camp fire, and in 'The Red Rider' I have tried to record one of the episodes in his life as faithfully as it was possible for me, with my limited powers, so to do.

"He knows the wide sweep of Arizona range from the high spots where the pines and the firs reach up down to the desert areas where grows the greasewood. If you like Buck, as I like him, maybe he will give his consent to the recording of some more of his experiences for you in good time.

"Thank you.

HARRISON CONRARD."

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If you will mail the coupon at once I will explain how I will arrange things so that you will get your profit the same day you earn it. If you make $30 in one day you will have that $30 in cash in the evening of the same day. You don't have to deliver the coats or collect the money due. I do that. When you drop an order into the mail box you are through, and you have your profits in your pocket.

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You don't have to invest any money and you don't have to put up any capital. Selling experience is not necessary, but if you have it, so much the better. Some of my most successful representatives who are now making from $100 to $200 a week never had any previous experience of this kind. These representatives started in just as I am offering to start you. And they soon discovered that this was the easiest way they ever heard of to make big money.

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Don't wait until someone else gets in ahead of you. Just mail the coupon and I will send you all the details of my offer. I will show you how you can have a permanent, profitable, honorable and pleasant business that will bring you a bigger income than the average merchant, doctor, lawyer or banker. I will show you how you can make $200 a week without working as hard as you are now. Don't miss this chance. Tear out the coupon and mail it to me right away. This is the big money-making opportunity you have been waiting for.

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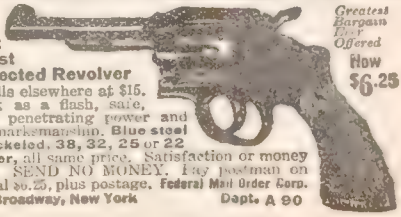

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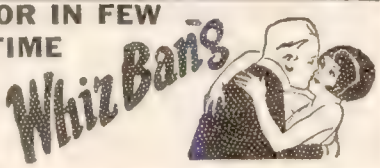

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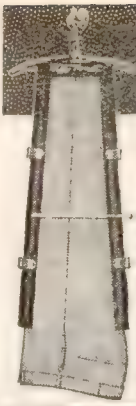

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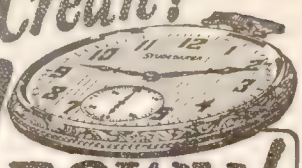

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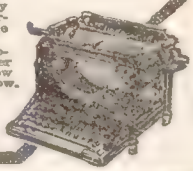

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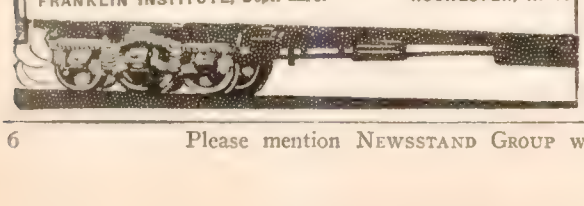

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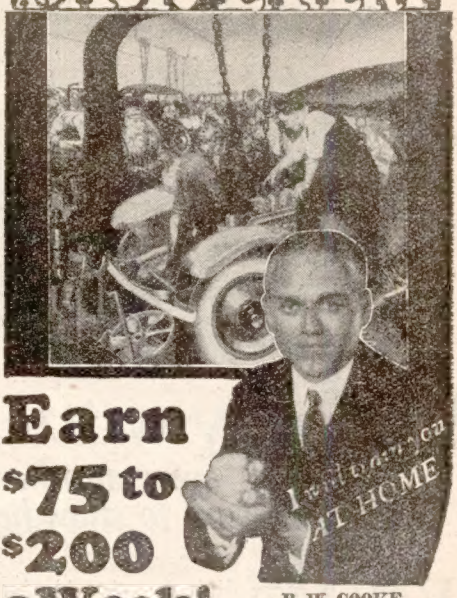

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